

ALSWH COVID-19 Survey

Report 5: Survey 5, 24 June 2020

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Background

The Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health (ALSWH) has been collecting comprehensive quantitative and qualitative data from over 57,000 Australian women for 25 years (alswh.org.au). As with the rest of the population, the women in the study have never lived through anything like the current pandemic. To capture this moment in time, a series of fortnightly short online surveys was deployed via email to women in the three ALSWH cohorts born 1989-95, 1973-78, and 1946-51, commencing in late April 2020. The purpose of this mixed methods survey was to ascertain women's experiences with COVID-19 testing, their overall wellbeing, and the changes occurring for them during the pandemic.

Method

COVID-19 Survey 5 was deployed on Wednesday 24 June 2020. Email invitations were sent to 29,027 women: 14,054 from the 1989-95 cohort, 8573 from the 1973-78 cohort, and 6400 from the 1946-51 cohort. In all, 7441 (26%) women returned a completed survey: 2246 (16%) from the 1989-95 cohort, 2537 (30%) from the 1973-78 cohort, and 2658 (42%) from the 1946-51 cohort.

This report presents data from the 7194 women who completed the COVID-19 Survey 5 within a 7-day period (24 to 30 June, inclusive). From the free-text comments provided by 2113 women, 600 were randomly sampled (200 from each cohort) and analysed for common content and major preliminary themes.

Findings

COVID-19 symptoms and testing

In all, 16% (1120) of women reported experiencing flu-like symptoms (e.g. fever, cough, sore throat, runny nose, shortness of breath) in the previous 14 days, 3% (240) reported that they thought they might have COVID-19, and 5% (394) reported having been tested for COVID-19 within the previous 14 days (see Table 1).

Table 1. Recent flu symptoms (within last 14 days) among 7194 ALSWH women

	1989-95 cohort N=2187		1973-78 cohort N=2441		1946-51 cohort N=2566	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Flu-like symptoms	557	25.5	424	17.4	139	5.4
Thought they might have COVID-19	155	7.1	63	2.6	22	0.9
Tested for COVID-19	202	9.2	148	6.1	44	1.7

Missing observations were included in the denominators.

Missing data for Flu-like symptoms: 1989-95 cohort n=13; 1973-78 cohort n=21; 1946-51 cohort n=26.

Missing data for Thought they might have COVID-19: 1989-95 cohort n=15; 1973-78 cohort n=29; 1946-51 cohort n=36.

Missing data for Tested for COVID-19: 1989-95 cohort n=16; 1973-78 cohort n=29; 1946-51 cohort n=38.

In Survey 5, one in 10 (10%) women reported having ever been tested for COVID-19. Among these women, 77% (574) of women reported one COVID-19 test, and 23% (168) of women reported more than one COVID-19 test (6 women did not report number of tests).

Psychological distress

Younger women were more likely to have high levels of psychological distress (as measured by the K10) than older women. More than one in three (37%) women aged 25-31 and almost one in five (18%) women aged 42-47 had high or very high levels of psychological distress over the previous four weeks, compared to 6% of women aged 69-74 (Figure 1).

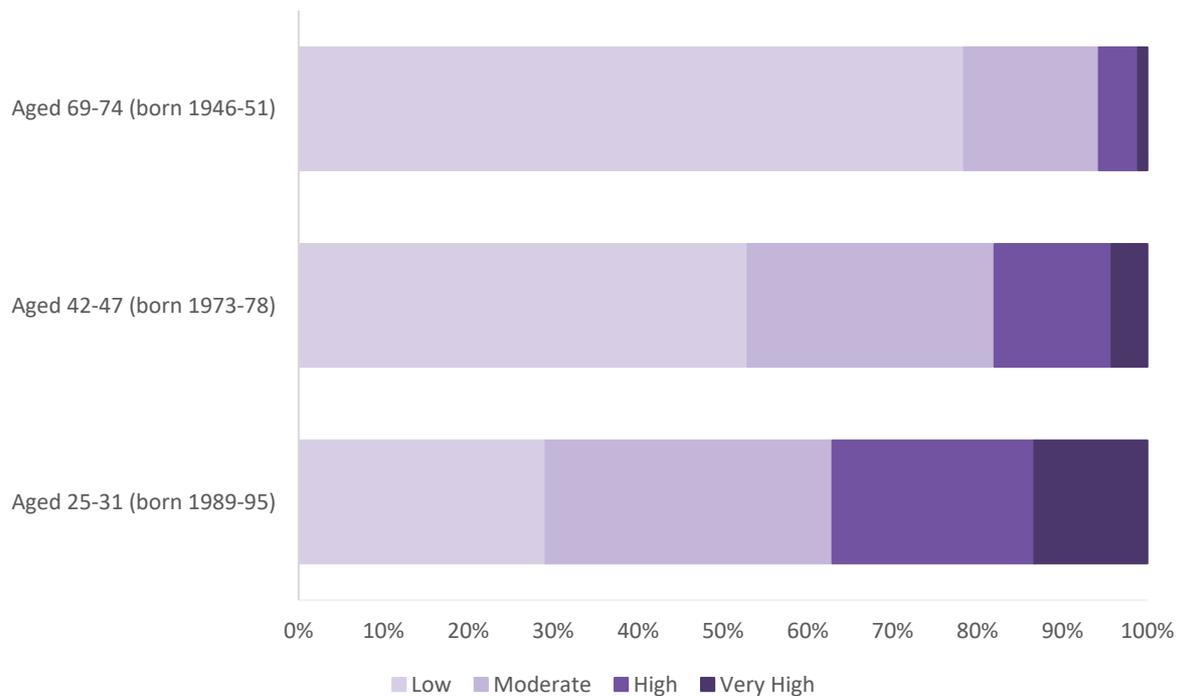


Figure 1: Psychological distress (measured using the K10) over the previous four weeks among women aged 25-31 (n=2187), 42-47 (n=2440) and 69-74 (n=2564)

What women said about their psychological state

Women across all three cohorts wrote about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their mental health. Isolation, home-schooling, and travel and gathering restrictions were some of the factors women attributed to an increase in their feelings of stress, anxiety and depression.

Isolated with a new baby has been extremely difficult and taxing on my mental health. 1989-95 cohort

Homeschooling and the kids are already at home on holidays again. The same feeling of no time for me is back. It scares me and makes me anxious that the same feelings will come back... 1973-78 cohort

Can't visit my grandchildren in the UK & it now looks like I can't visit my daughter in Brisbane in the foreseeable future. Oh dear - when is this ever going to end! 1946-51 cohort

Some women with pre-existing mental health conditions experienced a decline in their mental health, which was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

...The initial isolation period and the recent tighter restrictions has impacted my preexisting mental health conditions. 1989-95 cohort

My mental health (depression & BPD) has been exacerbated by isolation and the climate of fear due to the pandemic & connected restrictions. 1989-95 cohort

I was extremely anxious around the end of March/early April - I was in a new, senior role and I'd only been in the organisation for a few months when COVID started. I already felt somewhat overwhelmed due to the new role but the virus then greatly compounded that anxiety... 1973-78 cohort

My chronic treatment resistant depression which is always present has worsened more than usual this last 2 weeks I put this down to inability to do some of the activities that help me keep it at a manageable level. This distresses me. 1946-51 cohort

Women in the youngest two cohorts offered insight into experiences of workplace stress and career uncertainties. Many women spoke about their concern for future employment prospects.

Job uncertainties has played a role in stress over the last two weeks. Also have not been sleeping well at all over the past week. 1989-95 cohort

COVID has impacted on the recruitment processes of my employer though (I work for a university) and my future employment after my contract ends at the end of the year is uncertain and concerning to me. 1989-95 cohort

Again, employment issues surrounding the impact of COVID-19 on my work premises are still stressful and quite demoralising. My industry is almost at 'return to normal' stage, yet my place in it remains unknown... 1973-78 cohort

Anxiety over work security... 1973-78 cohort

Experiences of grief due to death and loss throughout the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in some women facing additional complexities and feelings of sorrow due to travel and gathering restrictions.

Hard when family pass away overseas, and can't comfort them. 1989-95 cohort

My Uncle has been given a very short time to live and I'm afraid I'll never see him again due to visiting restrictions, or even attend his funeral. 1973-78 cohort

My 91 year mother died during this time, and this is also contributing to the feelings. She lives in the USA. 1946-51 cohort

My stress was mainly due to the hospitalization & death of my elderly mother and care of my 96year old father. I live 2 hours drive away & have needed to travel a lot. 1946-51 cohort

The ongoing uncertainty due to the COVID-19 pandemic was deeply concerning for some women. The political climate, economic impacts and a general sense of dismay in humanity were at the forefront of the women's concerns.

If I'm being honest - mainly just losing a tonne of faith in the human race. This whole period has divided the world and has made the concept of freedom of

speech seem so far out of reach. Even without the restrictions - you just want to stay inside and get away from everything. 1989-95 cohort

Just feeling tired of it all... Worry about it returning. Worry about impact on young people. 1973-78 cohort

I'm feeling intensely negative about the political climate and the things which are being pushed thru at the moment under the cover of covid-19...I'm deeply worried about the societal impacts of the decisions and cuts being made and I think a huge proportion of the population are going to be in very deep financial distress for quite some time... 1973-78 cohort

...worrying about the rest of the world 's health and financial future. 1946-51 cohort

At the time of this survey, restrictions had begun to ease across the country. Women from all cohorts spoke about the positive changes the easing of restrictions had on their mental health and indicated feelings of 'normalcy'.

The opening up of the gyms has improved my mental health within the past two weeks. An aspect of normalcy returning has definitely eased my mood. 1989-95 cohort

Since the restrictions have lifted slightly I feel much happier. I realise how important human contact is to be and my energy... 1973-78 cohort

I did feel quite down a month ago but that has passed & now that restrictions have been lifted a little it feels more normal. 1946-51 cohort

Impact of COVID-19

What women said about the impact of COVID-19

At the time of Survey 5, while many restrictions had eased across Australia, Victorian cases had begun to increase again. Women from the two youngest cohorts commented on this, describing their distress over the recent outbreaks and associated restrictions.

The increase in COVID-19 cases and restrictions in Victoria has been very disheartening and almost feels like a retraumatisation of the experiences over the last few months. 1989-95 cohort

It's distressing for me to think that Victoria is back under lockdown restrictions... 1973-78 cohort

... It has been rather stressful not knowing if the state will be locked down and I may have difficulty returning home. I planned to head home in another couple of days and am waiting to hear back if my work will require me to go into 14 days of self isolation as a precaution. I had thought it was safe for me to travel down and visit my friend but the reality has been very different. 1973-78 cohort

Other women commented on their frustration towards the situation and the behaviour of others during the pandemic.

The recent outbreaks in Victoria has me feeling frustrated and nervous. Frustrated at people putting their own, but also the lives of their families, coworkers and strangers at risk... 1989-95 cohort

Not being able to visit my newborn niece in Tasmania due to border restrictions and increasing cases in Victoria makes me sad and angry (at the selfish people who went out even though they knew they were positive). 1989-95 cohort

Acknowledgements

The research on which this report is based was conducted as part of ALSWH at the University of Newcastle and the University of Queensland. We are grateful to the Australian Government Department of Health for funding ALSWH, and to the women who provided the survey data. We thank the University of Newcastle and the Hunter Medical Research Institute for providing funding for the COVID-19 surveys.