

# ALSWH COVID-19 Survey

## Report 2: Survey 2, 13 May 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](http://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 these surveys is to ascertain women's experiences during the pandemic through set questions, a series of themed topics, and an opportunity for free-text comments. This second survey includes responses to the set questions on women's experiences of flu-like symptoms, COVID-19 testing, their level of stress, and the topic theme of time spent in paid work and home schooling. The aim of this report is to provide a snapshot of the experiences of Australian women in mid-May 2020, adding to the information provided from the first survey report (covering 29 April to 5 May 2020).

### Method

COVID-19 Survey 2 was deployed on Wednesday 13 May 2020. Email invitations were sent to 29,748 women: 14,306 from the 1989-95 cohort, 8703 from the 1973-78 cohort, and 6739 from the 1946-51 cohort. In all, 8912 (30%) women returned a completed survey: 2897 (32.5%) from the 1989-95 cohort, 2987 (33.5%) from the 1973-78 cohort, and 3028 (34%) from the 1946-51 cohort.

This report presents data from the 8555 women who had completed the COVID-19 Survey 2 within a 7-day period (13 to 19 May, inclusive). From the free-text comments provided by 4540 women, 200 were randomly sampled from each cohort (600 comments in total) and analysed for common content and major preliminary themes.

## Findings

### COVID-19 symptoms and testing

In all, 13% (1072) of women reported experiencing flu-like symptoms (e.g. fever, cough, sore throat, runny nose, shortness of breath) in the previous 14 days, with 1% (113) reporting a change to their sense of taste or smell, and 4% (305) reporting that they thought they might have COVID-19 (Table 1).

COVID-19 testing was reported by 8% (659) of women. Among these women, 89% (586) reported having one COVID-19 test, and 11% (70) reported more than one COVID-19 test (three women did not report number of tests).

*Table 1. Recent flu symptoms (within last 14 days) among 8555 ALSWH women*

	1989-95 cohort N=2086		1973-78 cohort N=2855		1946-51 cohort N=2894	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
<b>Flu-like symptoms</b>	544	19	344	12	184	6
<b>Changes to taste/smell</b>	51	2	43	2	19	1
<b>Thought they might have COVID-19</b>	167	6	103	4	35	1

Note. 720 women did not respond to these items.

**Importantly, across all cohorts, 73% (785) of women who reported flu like symptoms did not get tested**, 69% (78) of women who reported changes in taste/smell did not get tested, while 51% (155) of the women who reported that they thought they might have had COVID-19 did not get tested.

#### What women said about COVID-19

Women from all cohorts wrote about being tested for COVID-19. A number of women explained that they felt they should be tested as a precaution, despite only experiencing mild symptoms.

*...feeling that I should be getting tested even though I don't have symptoms due to pressure from government. 1989-95 cohort*

*Only tested as I am [a health care worker] who had a slight sore throat. Would normally not have given it a second thought if not for the pandemic. 1973-78 cohort*

*I do have some anxiety about contracting the virus & recently chose to be tested as I had some mild symptoms. 1946-51 cohort*

Some women reported negative experiences with testing, including a lack of available information, difficulty booking the test, and discomfort during testing.

*I have looked into being tested but it isn't clear where to go at [local] hospital and if I have COVID I don't want to just [wander] around and the current wait to get into my Dr is 3 weeks. 1989-95 cohort*

*The test for COVID19 was awful and I cried. It hurt my nose and I had specks of blood in my snot afterwards. I found the process of booking a COVID19 test negative. The phone number wasn't working and the website wasn't working and when I tried to explain this to the medical centre, they were rude and cut me off and did not want to accept feedback on this. 1973-78 cohort*

## Stress

Younger women continued to be more likely to report high levels of stress than older women. Women aged 25-31 reported the highest levels of stress, with nearly one in four (24%) reporting feeling very or extremely stressed. Women aged 42-47 also reported high levels of stress, with more than one in six (16%) reporting feeling very or extremely stressed. Women aged 69-74 reported the lowest rates of stress, with 2% of women in this age group reporting feeling very or extremely stressed.

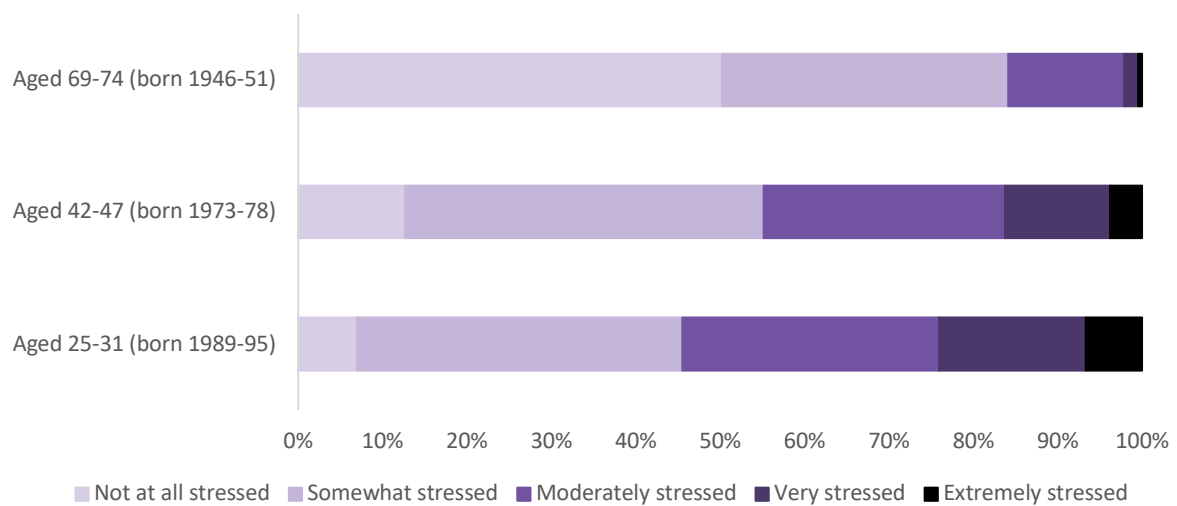


Figure 1: Stress levels of women aged 25-31 (n=2804), 42-47 (n=2850) and 69-74 (n=2881)

## Time use

### Paid work

Around 80% of women aged 25-31 and 42-47 indicated that they were engaged in paid work after COVID-19 restrictions started, compared to 9% of women aged 69-74. For the older workers, the majority indicated that they worked less than 20 hours a week. As presented in Figure 2, engaging in full-time work during the COVID-19 pandemic was reported by nearly half the women aged 25-31 (48%), while over of third of the women aged 42-47 reported full-time hours (39%). A number of women indicated that they were working in excess of 42 hours per week (11% and 15% for women aged 25-31 and 42-47, respectively.)

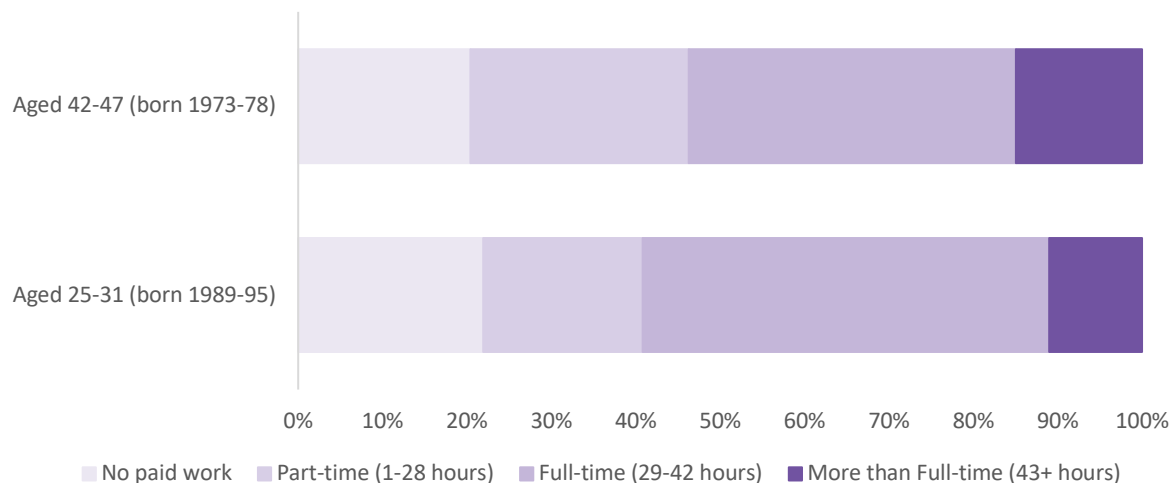


Figure 2: Hours spent in paid work in the last seven days, for women aged 25-31 (n=2604) and 42-47 (n=2489)

Overall, one in three women indicated that they were working fewer total hours during the COVID-19 pandemic than they were before the pandemic (32% for women aged 25-31 and 29% for women aged 42-47, Figure 3). However, some women reported working more hours during the COVID-19 pandemic than they were before the pandemic (12% among women aged 25-31 and 17% among women aged 42-47). There was also a notable increase in hours worked at home during the pandemic than had been indicated for work hours prior to the pandemic.

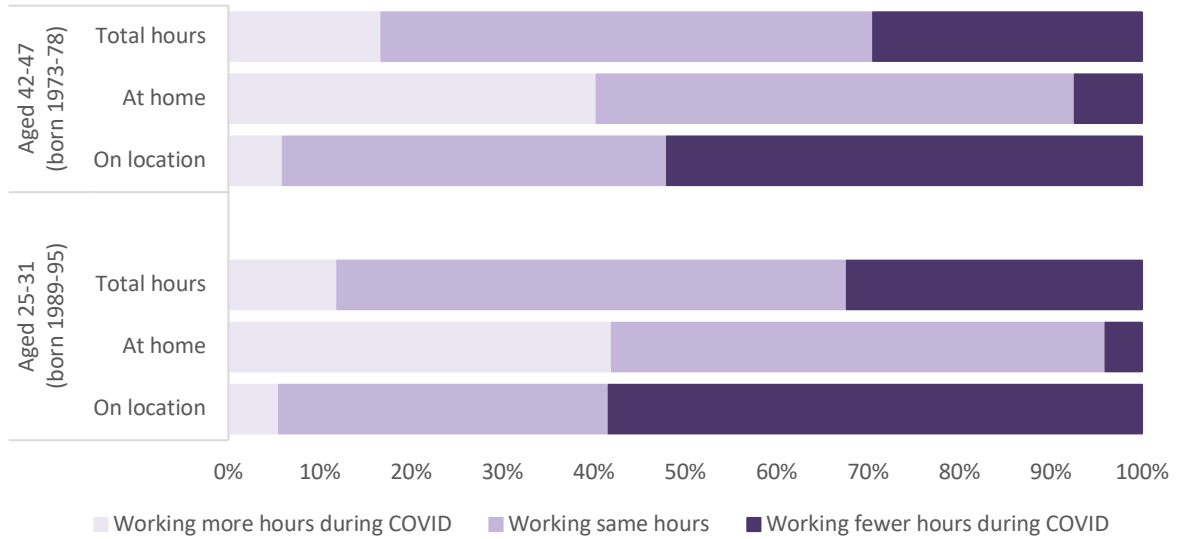


Figure 3: Comparison of hours worked in a week during COVID pandemic compared to working hours before COVID pandemic, for women aged 25-31 (n=2604) and 42-47 (n=2489)

### Home schooling

Time spent home schooling was more frequently reported by women aged 42-47, with 57% (1481/2578) responding that they had spent time home schooling, compared with 6% (151/2536) of women aged 25-31, and 9% (217/2407) of women aged 69-74. Among women who reported time spent home schooling, a quarter (26%) of women aged 25-31 and 42-47 reported home schooling for more than 20 hours in the last seven days, compared to 12% of women aged 69-74.

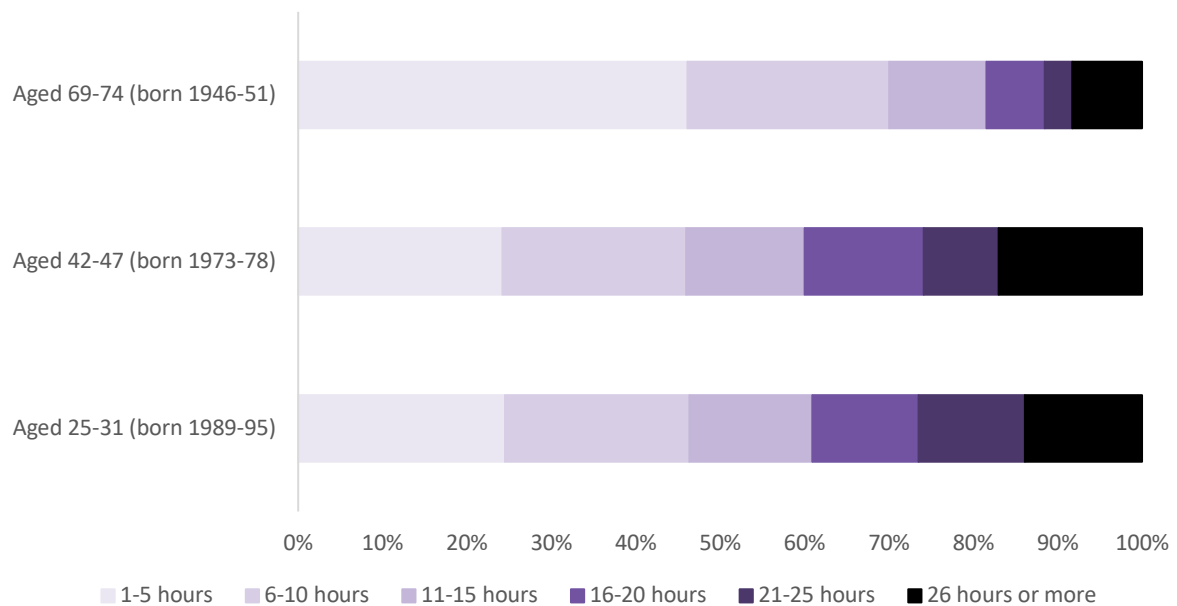


Figure 4: Number of hours spent home schooling in the last seven days, for women aged 25-31 (n=151), 42-47 (n=1481) and 69-74 (n=217)

## Paid work, home schooling and stress

Combining the total time spent working and home schooling, 15% of women aged 42-47 and 4% of women aged 25-31 indicated they had spent more than 50 hours a week in these activities since the COVID-19 restrictions started. These women were more likely to report feeling extremely or very stressed, than those who spent 50 hours a week or less in paid work and home schooling.

Among women aged 42-47 who spent more than 50 hours a week in paid work and home schooling, almost one in three reported feeling extremely or very stressed, compared to 14% of women who spent 50 hours a week or less in these activities (see Table 2).

For women aged 25-31, two in five women who spent more than 50 hours a week in paid work and home schooling reported feeling extremely or very stressed, compared to one in four of women who spent 50 hours a week or less in these activities (see Table 2).

*Table 2. Proportion of women feeling extremely or very stressed by whether they spent more or less than 50 hours/week in paid work and home schooling*

	1989-95 cohort (Aged 25-31)		1973-78 cohort (Aged 42-47)	
<b>Hours per week in paid work and home schooling</b>	>50	<50	>50	<50
<b>Feeling very or extremely stressed</b>	40%	24%	31%	14%

### What women said about time use

Women in all cohorts spoke about the impact of COVID-19 on paid employment, but the stress and uncertainty due to the reduction of paid work was felt mostly by the younger two cohorts.

*Stress levels increased commensurate with the fact I'll be partially stood down in June...it really affected my sense of self and purpose when I was told I'd be affected by the stand downs. It's also not helped by our HR team sending out stupid suggestions like maybe trying meditation or puzzles if we're feeling stressed. I don't need puzzles, I need job security. 1989-95 cohort*

*Our business has dropped off significantly as we are in the creative arts industry. I am worried about the future and whether our business will survive and if it doesn't what we would do instead. 1973-78 cohort*

Some women had increased paid hours or workload due to their professions.

*...I'm a teacher... My workload may be from home but it has definitely doubled. 1989-95 cohort*

*Having to work more hours to cover nursing shifts in my department. 1973-78 cohort*

Women in all cohorts wrote about home schooling their children or grandchildren, however the impact was reported most commonly by the cohort born 1973-78 who were juggling working from home and home-schooling.

*Trying to balance working (at Kindergarten) and helping my children with school work - or more importantly keep them (children) motivated and on track. Both children are struggling without face to face teacher contact when it comes to content they need assistance with. 1973-78 cohort*

*I've been working late nights, and early mornings to attempt to get all my work done. I have given up on getting my own work done during "school" hours. In conjunction with running a household as a single parent, I feel stretched pretty thin. 1973-78 cohort*

*The expectation from work and school to continue to operate a level in which you complete all your work tasks and guide your kids with remote learning has been intense. This, coupled with home duties has been a massive effort. Something has had to give, and for me, this has been exercise. I am now working, either with the kids schooling or my job from 8am through to 10pm. 1973-78 cohort*

## Impact of COVID-19

### What women said about the impact of COVID-19

Women in all cohorts wrote about the impact of COVID-19 on their mental health and wellbeing. In particular, women from the younger two cohorts reported significant stress and anxiety being heightened or brought on by the pandemic.

*Exasperated my depression, anxiety, stress. 1989-95 cohort*

*The main impact this pandemic has had on me is mental and emotional. I am very worried whenever we have to leave the house as one of my children suffer from seasonal asthma and my mother-in-law has moved in with us due to chronic health issues and doesn't see the significant risk the virus poses to my son or herself. 1973-78 cohort*

Women across all three cohorts commented on the impact of travel restrictions on their lives. Some explained that they had been forced to cancel or postpone important trips and events, while others were not able to travel to see close family members.

*The travel bans due to COVID-19 caused me to postpone my destination wedding in April, something we had planned and looked forward to for 18 months. The stress of changing and grief associated with this obviously has impacted me a lot. 1989-95 cohort*

*Not being able to travel to see my adult children has been the only real impact on my life. 1973-78 cohort.*

*My volunteering activities have been curtailed and I have missed being able to travel to see my grandchildren for birthdays. 1946-51 cohort*

Noncompliance with social distancing guidelines and recommendations was a concern for women in all three cohorts. Many women spoke about their frustration toward those who were not “following the rules”, some explaining that this had contributed to their stress and anxiety.

*...I have found it stressful saying no to family who were less concerned with following the guidelines than us. 1989-95 cohort*

*Also after being in isolation for 8 weeks I found going back into society extremely stressful as no one seemed to care and be social distancing nearly causing me to have a panic attack at the shopping centre. 1973-78 cohort*

*Had to stop to buy petrol. Service station supplied gloves which was nice to see (I carry my own though) But I was uncomfortable when people came too close at the checkout. Feel social distancing not as good this week. 1946-51 cohort*

A number of women commented on the recent easing of restrictions. There were mixed attitudes towards this. Some women were concerned that this was happening too soon, and expressed fear in anticipation of a second wave of COVID-19 in Australia.

*I have experienced anxiety regarding the 'reopening' of society following the relaxing of lockdown laws. I fear that others may take this relaxation of laws as an invitation to act like 'normal' and encourage a deadly second wave of Covid-19 cases. 1989-95 cohort*

*I have found that the 'common man' cannot be trusted to do the right thing by others in public, so the easing of lockdown restrictions are a huge concern for me when I need to shop for food, etc. Most people are zombies who don't care about others! 1973-78 cohort*

Other women welcomed the easing of restrictions, with many excited to be able to see friends and family again. Some explained that this had alleviated feelings of stress, anxiety, and isolation.

*With the easing of restrictions on elective procedures, I was finally able to have my diagnostic procedure today and hopefully my health will begin to improve. I am also grateful for the easing on travel restrictions as I was starting to feel anxious whenever I left the house but I don't have this concern any more. 1989-95 cohort*

*The changes to allowing gatherings up to 10 people has alleviated much stress. I have seen my family in person and feel a bit less stressed. 1973-78 cohort*

*Since restrictions for travel have been lifted. Was able to see the children other than Skype for first time since March 13. Has lifted my spirits more than I expected. 1946-51 cohort*



For some women in the younger two cohorts, the relaxation of restrictions meant an upcoming return to work, which was generally spoken about negatively. Women who had been working from home commented on the benefits of this, explaining that they would like to continue doing so. Others reported stress at the thought of returning to on-site work.

*I've loved working from home. Much easier to maintain a work life balance, get your washing done, and focus on things that matter. I found returning to the office this week hard because it's so distracting and there's so many reminders of COVID-19 outside of the house - you can't avoid it for your mental health as easily as you can at home. 1989-95 cohort*

*I love working from home. I would like to continue working from home forever! 1973-78 cohort*

*I have found my anxiety to have increased now that I know there is a date I have to return to onsite work. 1973-78 cohort*

Women in the 1973-78 cohort also commented on their children returning to school, with varying attitudes about this. Some women were pleased to hear that their children could return to school. In particular, this alleviated stress for those who had been finding home-schooling arrangements difficult.

*Very happy about the news that school is going back in Victoria in a few weeks! No more home schooling my own children and juggling teaching 5 year olds online! 1973-78 cohort*

*Kids miss friends and sport but going back to school helps significantly. 1973-78 cohort*

Other women in this cohort expressed concern about sending their children back to school, and felt that the re-opening of schools was being rushed.

*Worried about sending my children back to school. 1973-78 cohort*

*I am finding the government's rush to get all students back to school stressful, as it is already difficult to try and social distance and limit student numbers in any one area 1973-78 cohort*

In general, there was a sense of uncertainty in the comments from women across all three cohorts. Many appeared unsure of how long the pandemic would continue to affect them, and felt unable to make immediate plans in many aspects of their lives.

*I have felt a lot of stress about uncertainties in the future. 1989-95 cohort*

*Covid 19 has everyone on edge, what is going to happen at the end of Jobkeeper, will businesses be able to retain their staff at the end of this, will our workplace be able to carry on the same. So far it is OK, but the worries are over your head for everyone not just ourselves. 1973-78 cohort*

*... at this time it is difficult to see a time when social distancing will not be part of our lives. 1946-51 cohort*

Despite this, there were also reports of hopefulness and feelings of optimism. A number of women in all three cohorts described negative impacts of COVID-19, yet were able to maintain a positive outlook for the future.

*Mentally not feeling the best but a little better knowing restrictions are easing a bit. 1989-95 cohort*

*The massive downturn in work and hence finances is stressful, although I remain hopeful that it will make a turn in the positive direction soon. 1973-78 cohort*

*Just getting bored staying at home and not having any social outings - guess it will get better !!! 1946-51 cohort*

## Acknowledgements

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