

Alcohol and COVID-19

The start of a new year is usually a time when people think about improving their health and well-being, and this year the pandemic is making those concerns more important than ever. We are living in very stressful and anxious times and many people are using alcohol to help cope with their feelings. You might have started drinking more during this pandemic for various reasons such as boredom, hopelessness, stress, or to calm your anxious feelings. During the pandemic, alcohol use has been made light of with memes about people making “quarantinis” and jokes about drinking before 5 p.m. now that so many work from home. Virtual happy hours are popular and many states now allow restaurants to sell cocktails along with their takeout and delivery food. It’s no surprise that according to studies, alcohol use and sales are higher compared with a year ago.



According to the website, drinkaware, alcohol can help some people feel more at ease in certain situations, but these feelings are short-lived. The relaxed feeling you experience when you drink is due to the chemical changes alcohol causes in your brain, as the alcohol starts to suppress activity in part of the brain that is associated with inhibition. However, these effects wear off fast. If you rely on alcohol to mask anxiety, you may find you become reliant on it to relax. A likely side effect is that the more you drink, the greater your tolerance for alcohol will be. This means that over time you would need to drink more alcohol to get the same feeling, which could eventually lead to alcohol dependence.

Alcohol is a depressant. It slows down the brain and processes in the central nervous system. Alcohol can interfere with what our brains need to do for good mental health, so in the long-term, it can contribute to negative feelings and make anxiety harder to deal with. Alcohol is known to increase the symptoms of panic and anxiety disorders, depression and other mental disorders, and the risk of family and domestic violence. A new study has revealed that people struggling with anxiety and depression are more likely to increase their alcohol consumption amidst the global pandemic. The study, published in the journal Preventive Medicine and carried out by the researchers at NYU School of Global Public Health, stated that while drinking grew the most among younger people, older adults with anxiety and depression saw a sharper increase in their risk for harmful alcohol use.

If you’re concerned about your alcohol use, look for warning signs such as having trouble caring for your children and being present for them; feeling tired, irritable and unmotivated; experiencing headaches and noise sensitivity; being depressed and anxious, having increased conflict in relationships; hiding alcohol use from loved ones; having others express concern about your drinking; and feeling defensive about your drinking. If you’re having periods of time you can’t remember after drinking (blackouts); find yourself being hungover; if you are drinking a few drinks every day or early in the day; increasing the quantity you’re drinking, or find yourself thinking about drinking a lot, it’s likely you have a problem with alcohol.

Try to reduce your drinking by weaning yourself off alcohol and then see if you can go for a longer period of time without drinking. If you can’t stop, it is likely time to seek professional help. If you’re consuming alcohol to pass the time, or because of COVID related stress, take part in other coping activities, such as connecting and interacting safely with family and friends, exercising, getting enough sleep, eating well, and finding new hobbies or learning a new skill.

Talk with your physician, a mental health counselor or your Employee Assistance Program if you are having trouble coping with the ongoing pandemic or feel that your drinking is getting out of control.

Sources: drinkaware, verywellhealth, Las Vegas Sun



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