

# Sharp rise in severe, alcohol-related liver injury during pandemic: Nationwide analysis

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Number of alcohol-related hepatitis (ARH) hospitalizations from 2016 to 2020.  
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A boom in alcohol sales during the pandemic appears to have had dire consequences for some as hospital admissions for alcohol-related hepatitis, a life-threatening liver inflammation, increased dramatically, according to a study of national hospitalization data.

Researchers found increasing cases of the alcohol-related liver illness from 2016 through 2020, but the rise was particularly pronounced the

year COVID-19 arrived in the U.S. in 2020, which saw a 12.4% increase over 2019 levels. It was worse in younger patients, ages 18 to 44, a group that had a nearly 20% jump in hospital admissions for alcohol-related [hepatitis](#). The consequences were also more severe as in-hospital deaths increased by 24.6% in 2020 compared to 2019.

While the problem has been noted anecdotally and in regional studies, these findings show the growing problem on a national scale, said Dr. Kris Kowdley, professor at Washington State University's Elson S. Floyd College of Medicine and senior author of the study published in the *American Journal of the Medical Sciences*.

"Severe liver disease seems to be rising over time, but it appears to have increased even more dramatically during the pandemic," said Kowdley, who is also the director of the Liver Institute Northwest. "We confirmed that alcohol-related hepatitis hospital admissions increased continually from 2016 to 2020. We also found that [younger patients](#) and women had a higher increase in in-hospital mortality compared to their counterparts."

Alcohol-related hepatitis typically impacts about one third of heavy, regular drinkers—those who consume more than four alcoholic drinks daily. Symptoms can include abdominal pain, loss of appetite, vomiting and jaundice. The illness can lead to permanent liver damage, known as cirrhosis, and death.

Drawing on data from the National Inpatient Sample, which tracks hospitalization in 37 states, the study found about 823,000 patients were hospitalized with this condition from 2016 to 2020, the most recent year that data were available. While this is a relatively small group compared to the U.S. population, researchers are concerned about the rapid increase in cases and severity of outcomes.

In 2016, about 146,000 patients were admitted to the hospital with alcohol-related hepatitis. In 2019 the figure rose to nearly 169,000 representing a 5.1% annual increase from 2016 levels. Then it rose even more rapidly to over 190,000 in 2020, a 12.4% increase from 2019 levels.

While the condition is more prevalent in men overall, women saw a greater increase, a 14.6% rise between 2019-2020 compared to men at 12.2%. Geographically more cases were seen in the U.S. South, but the greatest rise was in the West.

There was also a shift in economic status. Looking at income by four groups, or quartiles, researchers found that between 2016 and 2019, the top two income groups had the highest increase in alcohol-related hepatitis. By 2020, that had changed, and the lowest income group showed the largest rise in cases.

"It's likely that a variety of factors contributed to a much higher rate of alcohol consumption during the pandemic, such as being socially isolated and having fewer barriers to drinking excess alcohol," said Kowdley. "It's also very possible that the relationship with [lower income](#) may be related to stress, anxiety and financial concerns associated with the pandemic."

Kowdley said the findings show a need for a multi-disciplinary approach to treat people suffering from alcohol use disorders, one that includes [mental health](#) and [behavioral therapy](#), nutritional counseling and increased use of medications that help reduce alcohol cravings. It is also important to reduce stigma associated with alcohol-related [liver](#) disease.

"We need to recognize and treat alcohol-related hepatitis as a disease like any other disease, and not stigmatize the patient suffering with this illness," he said. "We must also be cognizant both as [healthcare providers](#)

and patients that alcohol-related hepatitis can be a life-threatening disorder."

**More information:** Aalam Sohal et al, Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on alcohol-related hepatitis admissions: Analysis of nationwide data 2016-2020, *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.amjms.2023.06.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amjms.2023.06.002)

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