

COVID-19 pandemic brings new concerns about excessive drinking

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Unwinding with a glass of wine or a "quarantini" might seem like a good way to cope with the stress of the COVID-19 pandemic. But for some people, too much alcohol is making the ongoing health crisis worse.

"There are data to indicate people are [drinking](#) more than usual," said

Dr. Mariann Piano, a substance abuse researcher. "And there's no question that drinking too much every day leads to an increase in health risks."

Nielsen reports [alcohol](#) sales in stores were up 54% in late March compared to that time last year, while online sales were up nearly 500% in late April. According to a Morning Consult poll of 2,200 U.S. adults conducted in early April, 16% of all adults said they were drinking more during the pandemic, with higher rates among younger adults: One in 4 Millennials and nearly 1 in 5 Gen Xers said they had upped their alcohol intake.

But how much is too much?

That depends on a variety of factors, including your weight and gender, experts say. In general, "moderate" alcohol consumption means one to two drinks per day for men and one drink per day for women, according to federal dietary guidelines.

On the far end of the spectrum, binge drinking is generally defined as four or more drinks for women and five or more drinks for men in a two-hour period.

"Some people are saying, 'Whoa! *That's* [binge drinking](#)?' That's what I drink every night," said Piano, a professor of nursing and senior associate dean for research at Vanderbilt University in Nashville.

Excessive drinking can increase the risk for [liver disease](#), obesity, [breast cancer](#), depression, suicide, accidents and a wide range of cardiovascular problems, including high blood pressure, atrial fibrillation, stroke and heart attack.

Piano said alcohol also can lead to harmful interactions with prescription

drugs, dehydration and poor sleep. It also affects brain functions such as memory, balance and rational thinking—a key factor when it comes to stopping the spread of the coronavirus, she said. "It can completely impair your judgment. I've seen bars where there's no physical distancing happening, with people in clusters or lined up against each other."

Piano said people who are alcohol-dependent have compromised immune systems, reducing the body's ability to fight off infectious diseases such as COVID-19. And the more you drink, the higher your risk.

Humans have long turned to alcohol to try to relieve everyday stress, and the pandemic has pushed anxiety levels up for many people, said Dr. Adriane dela Cruz, a psychiatrist who specializes in drug and alcohol addiction.

"There are all these uncertainties: 'Will I still have a job? When will my kids go back to school? When can I see my family again and hug them?'" she said. "A lot of my patients talk about this idea that there's a hamster wheel constantly going in their head and that alcohol quiets down the hamster wheel."

Anxiety isn't the only thing fueling pandemic drinking. As people work from home and self-isolate, they experience loneliness and boredom—two more potential triggers for excessive alcohol use, she said.

"All these factors have crashed together to make this a potentially difficult time. There's no last call when you're your own bartender," said dela Cruz, an assistant professor in psychiatry at UT Southwestern Medical Center's Peter O'Donnell Jr. Brain Institute in Dallas.

Widespread joking on social media about "quarantinis" and COVID day-drinking might be fanning the flames of alcohol abuse.

"This cultural idea that alcohol is a good way to deal with problems is disheartening," she said. "If it's one drink, it's totally fine. But I'm worried when drinking becomes the routine, go-to solution."

There are lots of alcohol-free strategies for coping with pandemic stress, experts say. Staying physically active, getting plenty of sleep and eating healthy foods are three of the most important tactics.

Yoga, meditation and deep breathing techniques can also help. Talking to friends by phone or video chat can alleviate loneliness.

And when you are alone, it's smart to zero in on the things you love. "That might be walking outdoors or curling up with a good book or praying. Doing things that bring you joy or meaning are always the best ways to go," dela Cruz said.

If you find yourself drinking excessively on a regular basis, seek prompt professional help in person or via phone or video chat, she said. In addition, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's Disaster Distress Helpline is available at 800-985-5990. For those in recovery, Alcoholics Anonymous provides a listing of online meetings at aa-intergroup.org.

"A lot of psychiatrists and physicians are doing telemedicine as well as clinic visits," dela Cruz said. "If you think you might need help, help is always available."

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