

PRINT-Drinking Too Much During the Pandemic?

If you type in the word “drinking” into the search section of the social media platform Tik Tok, you can find thousands of videos centered around drinking – many using ironic hashtags such as #drinkingproblem #nodrinkingproblem #aaisforquitters #daydrinking. Tik Tok’s growth in users since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic has soared and its short video format features everything from people making smoothies with alcohol to people lip syncing to stand-up comedy bits about alcohol with a drink firmly in hand.

It’s a reinforcement of a culture that embraces the idea of alcohol as part of social interaction. Lots of people are winding down their work-from-home days with a glass of wine or a “quarantini” but there is increasing concern about the fact that people are drinking more since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Available data from the early months of the pandemic shows a big jump in alcohol consumption. Data research company [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.

Susanne Ringhausen, Manager Health and Psychological Services for OSF HealthCare Saint Anthony’s Health Center in Alton, Illinois says many people are feeling stressed by a lack of control over important aspects of their daily lives.

“You know there’s anxiety, lots of life changes, people are self-isolating so there’s loneliness, boredom and that kind of anxiety and stress can trigger that kind of drinking escalation. We would call that “relief drinking,” Ringhausen explains.

But how much is too much? New recommendations from the panel which reviews the latest clinical research is suggesting new federal government Dietary Guidelines advise individuals to limit their daily alcohol consumption to one drink a day for both men and women. It also recommends not drinking at all if you’ve never been a drinker.

Ringhausen warns the cumulative effect of too many Zoom happy hours can negatively impact your health. 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. Chronic alcohol use can also lead to [Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome \(ARDS\)](#), a potentially deadly condition in which fluid builds up in the lung -- a condition often seen in the more severe COVID-19 patients.

We have a culture that celebrates the idea of drinking as a solution with catch phrases such as “Anytime is wine time” and “Its 5 o’clock somewhere,” but Ringhausen says you don’t have to be an alcoholic for alcohol consumption to have a negative impact on your life.

“Where someone might have increased tolerance for alcohol, meaning as they drink more they *need* to drink more to have the same effect on their body and mind and so someone with [Alcohol Use Disorder](#) might experience that sudden urge to drink and really start to avoid non-alcohol related activities with other people,” she says.

According to the CDC, 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. Drinking also lowers inhibitions. Ringhausen says that can lead to more risky behavior when it comes to COVID-19 precautions.

“As our inhibitions go down and our drinking goes up, people can ignore the CDC guidelines for masking and physical distancing. And safe practices ... some of that goes out the window and that’s where you’re seeing in the news, it’s (the virus spread) escalating and where intoxication is contributing to that.”

Ringhausen suggests looking for more positive outlets to relieve stress and help you cope during these strange and unpredictable times. Video chats to keep connected with family, friends and co-workers are good for your mental health but she suggests they don’t have to center around drinking.

She suggests, “Exercise routines or even fun scrapbooking activities or any kind of hobby you could imagine could be done virtually via Zoom so it does not have to revolve around drinking,”

Six months into the pandemic, health leaders who are worried about the lasting impact of this big spike in drinking say it might be a good time to reflect on your habits.

“If you see yourself slipping into a bad pattern, take a break. Just take a break from drinking and maybe don’t keep it in the house for a while and that’ll help you cut back or get back on track. Let other friends and family know you’re cutting back. That will be helpful to get some support,” she advises.

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism defines binge drinking as a pattern of drinking that brings the blood alcohol (BAC) to 0.08 or higher. For a typical adult, that translates to a man having five or more drinks or four or more drinks for a woman within two hours. If you find yourself drinking excessively on a regular basis, Ringhausen stresses, there is support to help you make a positive change.

“You’re not alone. I want people to know it’s easy to access help. Contact OSF; we have behavioral health navigators as well as behavioral health counseling available when people want to consult and just go over an issue that’s going on in their life. It can be just one time or they come in for a few sessions to get a handle on a life issue. But, they are not alone.”

If you are concerned about your drinking, you can take an [Alcohol Use Assessment](#) on the OSF HealthCare website. You can also reach out to an OSF HealthCare Behavioral Health Navigator [here](#).