



# Another Crisis Amidst a Pandemic: Substance Misuse

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The potential for harm associated with alcohol and drug use are increasing as the social and economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic continues.

In the wake of past experiences of mass trauma, such as natural disasters, an overall increase in alcohol has been recorded.\* These events cause widespread impact affecting whole populations. On an individual level, stressors, such as job loss, financial pressures, death of a loved one, loss of one's home, or relationship breakdowns, can lead to an increase in alcohol consumption.

As social restrictions have continued from weeks to months, people are struggling to adapt to their disrupted routines, or have limited access to their self-care strategies, such as going to the gym, socialising with friends or undertaking hobbies outside of the home. Relationships are strained by the new pressures of working from home. Parents are feeling overwhelmed by home schooling and maintaining their work commitments.

Some individuals may find themselves consuming alcohol or using other substances as a means to cope with anxiety, stress, negativity, boredom, and our changing environment. The Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) conducted a poll of 1,045 Australians and found 70% reported they were drinking more alcohol than usual since the COVID-19 outbreak.\*\*

Like any other toxic substance, alcohol should be treated with caution. Using alcohol to cope can:

- Affect your body's ability to regulate sleep, directly impacting your immune function
- Affect judgement, sight, and co-ordination
- Cause frequent infections
- Impact your ability to concentrate
- Have a detrimental effect on your relationships.

This time may pose a challenge for anyone in recovery from drug dependence; accessing their usual support services may be more difficult to access. As stricter isolation requirements are imposed, there is an increased risk of people using drugs alone, as there may not be someone to ask for help.

Moreover, those who have previously experienced problems with alcohol and/or other drugs could find the current situation heightens their risk of relapse.

## Managing Your Alcohol Intake

Monitoring your alcohol intake is important, as alcoholic drinks often vary in strength and serving sizes. This can be harder to do when drinking at home, as we often free-pour rather than using standard measurements.

To reduce the risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury, adults should drink less than ten standard drinks a week and no more than four standard drinks on one day. The less you choose to drink, the lower your risk of alcohol-related harm. For some people not drinking at all is the safest option. Give your body time to detox from alcohol by having two alcohol-free days each week.

Strategies to reduce your alcohol intake:

- Drink water or other non-alcoholic beverages between each alcoholic drink
- Don't allow someone else to top up your glass if you're sharing a bottle of wine as you may lose track of how many drinks you've consumed
- Avoid high-alcohol content beverages, such as stronger beers or wines, and spirits
- Consume food before and while drinking, to slow your drinking pace and the alcohol absorption
- Occupy yourself while drinking to reduce the amount you are consuming.

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## Preventing Substance Use During COVID-19

During a pandemic, where individuals are isolated and restricted, a dependency can begin. The full impact of this dependency may not be visible for some time, long after restrictions ease and individual's return to their normal activities. This emphasises the need for individuals to recreate order in their life, maintain daily routines, and avoid the use of substances to cope during this period of uncertainty.

Strategies to avoid substance use:

- Stay connected to your social network, either in-person as restrictions lift or virtually
- Connect with your social network by undertaking activities or hobbies that don't provide an opportunity for alcohol or substance use
- Connect with a clinician via the EAP to understand your triggers and develop strategies to manage situations, circumstances, and thoughts that can trigger substance use
- Be physically active by exercising regularly
- Undertake hobbies, such as gardening, yoga, or singing
- Maintain a structure and daily routine that includes dressing, eating, and other activities of daily living
- Practice relaxation activities to reduce stress and anxiety levels, such as mindfulness.

## Support is Available

The relationship between alcohol, drug use, and mental health is a complex one. Just like physical health, your mental health and wellbeing can have a huge impact on all aspects of life. If you notice your alcohol or drug use is negatively affecting your mood and impacting your life, it may be time to reach out for help.

\*Keyes, K., Hatzenbuehler, M., Hasin, D., Stressful life experiences, alcohol consumption, and alcohol use disorders: the epidemiologic evidence for four main types of stressors. *Psychopharmacology*, 2011(218), 1-17, and de Goeij, M., Suhrcke, M., Toffolutti, V., van de Mheen, D., Schoenmakers, T., and Kunst A., How economic crises affect alcohol consumption and alcohol-related health problems: A realist systematic review. *Social Science & Medicine*. 2015(131), 131-46

\*\*The Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE), "Alcohol Sales & use During COVID-19", <https://fare.org.au/wp-content/uploads/COVID-19-POLL.pdf>.



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