

The Impact of COVID-19 on Alcohol Consumption

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Dear Sir,

Excessive alcohol consumption, particularly in a binge like pattern, continues to be a growing public health concern in Ireland. It is estimated that Irish adults drink 10.78 litres per capita per year and the World Health Organisation (WHO) has ranked Ireland joint third for binge drinking in an analysis of 194 nations¹. Alcohol remains one of the leading causes of preventable mortality and morbidity globally, and it has previously been estimated that ten percent of all general inpatient hospital costs, seven percent of GP costs and up to thirty percent of emergency department costs are alcohol related².

In an attempt to control the 2019-Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the Irish government introduced distancing measures and lockdown. Prolonged isolation at home and social distancing may lead to stress, boredom and anxiety. Jacob et al found that more than one in six UK adults increased their alcohol consumption during lockdown, and a higher proportion of these were younger adults³. These findings were similar to Koopmann et al⁴, who found that thirty-five percent of their sample of German adults reported increased alcohol consumption during lockdown.

At our institution, we conducted an anonymous, cross-sectional questionnaire-based survey of all patients who presented to the Emergency Department over the period of a week in December 2020, relating to patterns of alcohol intake pre and post the introduction of social distancing measures.

We received sixty one responses, twenty-nine (47%) male and thirty-two (52%) female. Nineteen respondents (31%) report reduced hours/loss of job since pandemic. Eighteen (30%) respondents reported drinking more than three times a week and forty one (66%) self-reporting to drinking more standard drinks than is recommended for gender at baseline. Twenty-one respondents (41%) subjectively believe that they are drinking more since March 2020, with boredom (n=12) and loneliness (n=7) identified as the primary motivating factors behind this. These differences were found for all sociodemographic subgroups assessed.

We believe that this small study provides evidence of increased alcohol consumption in Ireland post introduction of COVID-19 restrictions. Our data demonstrates that even pre-pandemic, our cohort were consuming more than the recommended intake of alcohol, particularly in a binge pattern. These data provide evidence of changes in alcohol use, and healthcare providers should be aware of potential increase in new diagnoses alcohol use disorder and alcohol related liver disease with the future easing of restrictions.

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