

## Alcohol Use During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Stressful events such as the COVID-19 pandemic can affect the way people drink alcohol. People may be drinking more alcohol as a response to sudden loss in income, loss of loved ones, boredom or being unable to practice other coping strategies. Loss and stress may be more acute and persistent in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color where the burden of COVID-19 and racism have been most concentrated. Many people can enjoy drinking alcohol with few health risks but drinking to cope with stressful events may worsen any challenges you have controlling or limiting alcohol use.

### Mindful Drinking

Being mindful about your drinking can help you set boundaries allowing you to drink alcohol in a healthier way. The following strategies can help:

- Take note of how much you drink, and when and where you drink more.
  - Pay attention to your triggers for drinking. Write down the settings, experiences, time of day and people who may trigger the urge to drink.
- If you drink alcohol to cope with stress, try to find other ways to relieve stress:
  - Exercise or walk outside while maintaining at least 6 feet of distance from others and wear a [face covering](#). Take breaks from social media and the news; reach out to talk with loved ones.
  - Being at home with others can be stressful. Talk with your family or roommates to find ways that allow everyone to have some alone time.
- Plan ahead. Set a limit for how many drinks you want to have in a day and write it down.
  - You might be buying larger quantities of alcohol to avoid frequent trips to the store. Be mindful of how this affects the amount you drink.
- Space your drinks out over time and drink non-alcoholic drinks, such as seltzer or water, in between alcoholic drinks. Non-alcoholic drinks help to counteract alcohol's dehydrating effects and can slow your body's alcohol absorption.
- Eat food while you drink. Food can slow your body's alcohol absorption and lowers the risk of digestive irritation the next day.
- Participate in activities that do not center around drinking alcohol.

### Concerned About Alcohol Use?

Sometimes people may struggle with their alcohol use. Below are some questions<sup>1</sup> to ask yourself or your loved ones to see if you or they might benefit from more support around alcohol use.

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<sup>1</sup>National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. Alcohol effects on health. Alcohol use disorder. <https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohol-health/overview-alcohol-consumption/alcohol-use-disorders>. Accessed May 5, 2020.

In the past year, have you:

- Had times when you ended up drinking more or longer than you intended?
- More than once wanted to cut down or stop drinking, or tried to, but could not?
- Spent a lot of time drinking, being sick or getting over hangovers?
- Experienced craving — a strong need or urge to drink?
- Found that drinking or being sick from drinking often interfered with taking care of your home or family? Caused job troubles? Or school problems?
- Continued to drink even though it was causing trouble with your family or friends?
- Given up or cut back on activities that were important or interesting to you, or gave you pleasure, in order to drink?
- More than once gotten into situations, while or shortly after drinking, that increased your chances of getting hurt (such as driving, swimming, using machinery or walking in a dangerous area)?
- Continued to drink even though it made you feel depressed, anxious or added to another health problem? Or after having a memory blackout?
- Had to drink much more than you once did to get the effect you want? Or found that your usual number of drinks had much less effect than before?
- Found that when the effects of alcohol were wearing off, you had withdrawal symptoms, such as trouble sleeping, shakiness, irritability, anxiety, depression, restlessness, nausea or sweating? Or sensed things that were not there?

If you answered **yes** to one or more questions, you may benefit from additional support for alcohol use.

### **How to Access More Support**

The stress caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, recent acts of state sanctioned violence and blatant racism may negatively affect your relationship with alcohol for the first time. You may even notice worsening of existing challenges with alcohol use. In addition, low-income, communities of color often have high numbers of alcohol retailers, which means residents have increased access to and may be at increased risk for excessive alcohol consumption and related harm. It may feel overwhelming to navigate resources during the pandemic, especially for anyone dealing with effects of the pandemic in multiple parts of their life or who was already navigating major stressors before the pandemic. It is OK to seek support for alcohol use. Being mindful of your relationship with alcohol can help you decide the safest way to drink during this stressful time and in the future. If you think drinking alcohol is negatively affecting your life, talk to someone you trust, such as a close friend, family member, mental health professional or medical provider. [See below](#) for additional support options.

If you decide to stop drinking alcohol, be aware that if you have drunk heavily for a long period of time, you may experience withdrawal symptoms including nausea, sweating, tremors, anxiety, restlessness, hallucinations, seizures and death. Talk with a medical provider **before** you stop alcohol use to figure out if you need medical supervision.

**Additional support is available:**

- NYC Well offers a number of well-being and emotional support apps (including substance use apps) that can help you cope: [nycwell.cityofnewyork.us/en/app-library](https://nycwell.cityofnewyork.us/en/app-library).
  - NYC Well staff are available 24/7 and can provide brief counseling and referrals to care in over 200 languages. For support, call **888-NYC-WELL** (888-692- 9355), text "WELL" to 65173 or chat online by visiting [nyc.gov/nycwell](https://nyc.gov/nycwell).
- [New York State Office of Addiction Services and Supports \(OASAS\)](#) provides education on alcohol and other substance use for individuals and families. You can use their [treatment locator tool](#) to find treatment options in your area.
- Friends of Recovery New York provides links to a variety of organizations that offer online support groups and resources for both individuals and families. Visit [for-ny.org/get-help](https://for-ny.org/get-help) for more information.
- You can participate in counseling and support groups through virtual meetings. Search for online groups by using search terms such as “harm reduction online support group,” “Medication Assisted Recovery Anonymous,” “Alcoholics Anonymous” or “SMART Recovery”.
- For additional resources that address issues such as financial help, food, health care or insurance coverage, and more, see the [Comprehensive Resource Guide](#).

**The NYC Health Department may change recommendations as the situation evolves.** 6.30.20