

# Alcohol and COVID-19: what you need to know



Facing the COVID-19 (new coronavirus disease) pandemic, the countries of the world must take decisive action to stop the spread of the virus. In these critical circumstances, it is essential that everyone is informed about other health risks and hazards so that they can stay safe and healthy.

The following factsheet provides important information that you should know about alcohol consumption and COVID-19. It addresses, among other things, the misinformation that is being spread through social media and other communication channels about alcohol and COVID-19.

## The most important point to remember:

**In no way will consumption of alcohol protect you from COVID-19 or prevent you from being infected by it**

### General facts about alcohol and your body



Ethyl alcohol (ethanol) is the substance in alcoholic beverages that is responsible for most of the harms that arise from their consumption, irrespective of whether it is consumed in the form of wine, beer, spirits or anything else.

Unfortunately, other toxic substances that may smell like ethanol can be added in adulterated beverages that are produced informally or illegally; or they may be present in alcoholic products that are not intended for human consumption, such as hand disinfectant. Added substances such as methanol can be fatal even in small amounts or may lead to blindness and kidney disease, among other problems. According to media reports and anecdotal sources, deaths related to the ingestion of such alcoholic products, based on the mistaken belief that they will somehow offer protection against the virus, have already occurred in some countries during the COVID-19 outbreak.

### These are the general facts you should know about the consumption of alcohol and health:

- Alcohol has effects, both short-term and long-term, on **almost every single organ of your body**. Overall, the evidence suggests that there is **no “safe limit”** – in fact, the risk of damage to your health increases with each drink of alcohol consumed.
- Alcohol use, especially heavy use, **weakens the immune system** and thus reduces the ability to cope with infectious diseases.
- Alcohol, even in very small quantities, is known to **cause certain types of cancer**.
- Alcohol **alters your thoughts, judgement, decision-making and behaviour**.

- Alcohol, even in small amounts, is a **risk to the unborn child** at any time during pregnancy.
- Alcohol increases the risk, frequency and severity of **perpetration of interpersonal violence** such as intimate partner violence, sexual violence, youth violence, elder abuse, and violence against children.
- Alcohol increases the risk of death and injury from **road traffic injuries, drowning and falls.**
- Heavy use of alcohol **increases the risk of acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS)**, one of the most severe complications of COVID-19.

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### General myths about alcohol and COVID-19



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| <i>Myth</i> | <i>Consuming alcohol destroys the virus that causes COVID-19.</i>  |
| <b>Fact</b> | <b>Consuming alcohol will not destroy the virus</b> , and its consumption is likely to increase the health risks if a person becomes infected with the virus. Alcohol (at a concentration of at least 60% by volume) works as a disinfectant on your skin, but it has no such effect within your system when ingested. |
| <i>Myth</i> | <i>Drinking strong alcohol kills the virus in the inhaled air.</i>   |
| <b>Fact</b> | <b>Consumption of alcohol will not kill the virus in the inhaled air</b> ; it will not disinfect your mouth and throat; and it will not give you any kind of protection against COVID-19.  |
| <i>Myth</i> | <i>Alcohol (beer, wine, distilled spirits or herbal alcohol) stimulates immunity and resistance to the virus.</i>  |
| <b>Fact</b> | <b>Alcohol has a deleterious effect on your immune system</b> and will not stimulate immunity and virus resistance.  |

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### Alcohol: what to do, and what not to do, during the COVID-19 pandemic



- Avoid alcohol altogether so that you do not undermine your own immune system and health and do not risk the health of others.
- Stay sober so that you can remain vigilant, act quickly and make decisions with a clear head, for yourself and others in your family and community.
- If you drink, keep your drinking to a minimum and avoid getting intoxicated.
- Avoid alcohol as a social cue for smoking, and vice versa: people tend to smoke, or smoke more, if they drink alcohol, and smoking is associated with more complicated and dangerous progression of COVID-19. Remember, too, that indoor smoking is harmful to others in your household and should be avoided.
- Make sure that children and young people do not have access to alcohol and do not let them see you consume alcohol – be a role model.

- Discuss with children and young people the problems associated with drinking and COVID-19, such as violations of quarantine and physical distancing, which can make the pandemic worse.
- Monitor the screen time of your children (including TV), as such media are flooded with alcohol advertising and promotion; they also spread harmful misinformation that may stimulate early initiation and increased consumption of alcohol.
- Never mix alcohol with medications, even herbal or over-the-counter remedies, as this could make them less effective, or it might increase their potency to a level where they become toxic and dangerous.
- Do not consume alcohol if you take any medication acting on the central nervous system (e.g. pain killers, sleeping tablets, anti-depressants, etc), as alcohol might interfere with your liver function and cause liver failure or other serious problems.

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### Alcohol and physical distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic



To slow down the spread of the virus, the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends physical distancing of at least one meter from sick people as a protective measure. Bars, casinos, night clubs, restaurants and other places where people gather to consume alcohol (including in the home) increase the risk of transmission of the virus.

Physical distancing therefore reduces the availability of alcohol, so it presents a great opportunity to reduce your drinking and become healthier.

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### Alcohol and home isolation or quarantine



To limit the spread of COVID-19, countries have progressively introduced community-wide lockdowns and periods of quarantine for those who are suspected of having contracted the virus or have been in contact with someone infected by the virus. This means that an unprecedented number of people are now staying in their homes.

It is important to understand that alcohol poses risks to your health and safety and should therefore be avoided during periods of home isolation or quarantine.

- When working from home, adhere to your usual workplace rules and do not drink. Remember that after a lunch break you should still be in a fit state to work – and that is not possible if you are under the influence of alcohol.
- Alcohol is not a necessary part of your diet and should not be a priority on your shopping list. Avoid stockpiling alcohol at home, as this will potentially increase your alcohol consumption and the consumption of others in your household.
- Your time, money and other resources are better invested in buying healthy and nutritious food that will maintain good health and enhance your immune system response. For further ideas, take a look at the food and nutrition tips during self-quarantine issued by WHO.<sup>1</sup>

- You might think that alcohol helps you to cope with stress, but it is not in fact a good coping mechanism, as it is known to increase the symptoms of panic and anxiety disorders, depression and other mental disorders, and the risk of family and domestic violence.
- Instead of consuming alcohol to pass your time at home, try an indoor workout. Physical activity strengthens the immune system and overall – from both a short-term and a long-term perspective – is a highly beneficial way of spending a period of quarantine.<sup>2</sup>
- Do not introduce your children or other young people to drinking and do not get intoxicated in front of them. Child abuse and neglect can be aggravated by alcohol consumption, especially in crowded housing situations where isolation from the drinker is not possible.
- Disinfectant alcohol can easily become accessible for consumption purposes in home isolation. It is important, therefore, to keep such products out of the reach of children and underage drinkers and others who may misuse them.
- Alcohol use can increase during self-isolation and both, isolation and drinking, may also increase the risk of suicide, so reducing your alcohol consumption is very important. If you have suicidal thoughts, you should call your local or national health hotlines
- Alcohol is closely associated with violence, including intimate partner violence. Men perpetrate most of the violence against women, which is worsened by their alcohol consumption, while women experiencing violence are likely to increase their alcohol use as a coping mechanism. If you are a victim of violence and are confined with the perpetrator in home isolation, you need a safety plan in case the situation escalates. This includes having a neighbour, friend, relative or shelter to go to in the event that you need to leave the house immediately. Try to reach out to supportive family members and/or friends and seek support from a hotline or local services for survivors. If you are under quarantine and need to leave the house immediately, call a local support hotline and reach out to someone you trust.

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### Alcohol use disorders and COVID-19



Alcohol use disorders are characterized by heavy alcohol use and loss of control over alcohol intake. Although they are among the most prevalent mental disorders globally, they are also among the most stigmatized.

People with an alcohol use disorder are at greater risk of COVID-19 not only because of the impact of alcohol on their health but also because they are more likely to experience homelessness or incarceration than other members of the population. It is therefore essential, under the current conditions, that people who need help because of their alcohol use get all the support they need.

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<sup>1</sup> Food and nutrition tips during self-quarantine. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2020 ([http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/coronavirus-covid-19/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-technical-guidance/food-and-nutrition-tips-during-self-quarantine/\\_recache](http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/coronavirus-covid-19/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-technical-guidance/food-and-nutrition-tips-during-self-quarantine/_recache)).

<sup>2</sup> How to stay physically active during COVID-19 self-quarantine. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2020 (<http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/coronavirus-covid-19/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-technical-guidance/stay-physically-active-during-self-quarantine>).

If you, or a person close to you, have problems in relation to alcohol use, please consider the following:

- The present situation is a unique opportunity to quit drinking, or at least to cut down considerably, as various social cues and peer pressure situations, such as parties, friends' gatherings, restaurants and clubs, are (by necessity) avoidable.
- Online interventions for alcohol use disorders by professionals and mutual help groups can be less stigmatizing as they offer greater anonymity and privacy, so check out what help you can get online.
- Create a buddy and self-support system with someone you trust and reach out for extra help if needed, such as online counselling, interventions and support groups.
- Practise physical distancing, but do not socially isolate: call, text and/or write to your friends, colleagues, neighbours and relatives. Use new and creative ways of connecting to others without actual physical contact.
- Avoid alcohol cues and triggers on TV and media where there is pervasive marketing and promotion of alcohol; be careful to avoid links to social media that are sponsored by the alcohol industry.
- Try to maintain your daily routine as much as you can, focus on things that you can control and try to keep grounded – for instance, through a daily workout, hobbies or mind relaxation techniques.
- If you become infected, discuss with health personnel your alcohol consumption so that they can make the most appropriate decisions with respect to your overall health condition.

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### How to find reliable information and how to spot misinformation



- Seek trusted sources of information, such as WHO, national health authorities and your health professional. For updated information on COVID-19, check the WHO website<sup>3</sup>
- Always double-check the information you receive. Beware of websites and texts that use the same messages and have the same writing and overall style, as these are likely to be viral messages produced for mass distribution that are intended to mislead.
- Beware of false and misleading claims, particularly in relation to the effects of alcohol on health and immunity. Such claims should be categorically discounted as a source of health information as there is no evidence that drinking alcohol offers any protection against COVID-19 or has a positive effect on the course and outcomes of any infectious disease.
- Beware of claims made online that alcohol offers any essential benefits that you really need to have during your period of home isolation or quarantine. Alcohol is in no way a necessary component of your diet and lifestyle.

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<sup>3</sup> Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak [online information portal]. Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2020. (<http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-emergencies/coronavirus-covid-19>).

- Be aware that websites and social media posts offering online sale and home delivery of alcoholic beverages can lead to increased alcohol consumption and may easily target children.
- If you do not drink, do not let any supposed health reason or claim persuade you to start.

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**Finally, the key point to remember:**

**Under no circumstances should you drink any type of alcoholic product as a means of preventing or treating COVID-19 infection.**

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The document was prepared by Maria Neufeld, Consultant, WHO European Office for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases, and revised by Carina Ferreira-Borges, Programme Manager, Alcohol, Illicit Drugs and Prison Health, and Maristela Monteiro, Senior Advisor Alcohol, Pan American Health Organization.

Additional inputs were received from Elena Yurasova, Technical Officer, WHO Office in the Russian Federation; Jürgen Rehm, Senior Scientist, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, Toronto, Canada; Khalid Saeed, Regional Advisor, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean; Isabel Yordi Aguirre, Programme Manager, Gender and Human Rights, WHO Regional Office for Europe; Jonathon Passmore, Programme Manager, Violence and Injury Prevention, WHO Regional Office for Europe; Michael Thorn, Consultant, WHO European Office for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases; and Vladimir Poznyak, Coordinator, Management of Substance Abuse, WHO headquarters.

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