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## Is there a rise in alcohol deaths during COVID-19 pandemic?

Almost overnight, COVID-19 turned our lives upside down. Millions of people lost loved ones or incomes and struggled to live in isolation away from friends and family. This, in combination with the general anxiety of living through a global epidemic, led many to turn to alcohol to cope.

[Alcohol](#) killed more people in 2020 in England and Wales than in any of the previous 20 years, [official ONS data](#) shows. There were 7,423 deaths from alcohol misuse last year – a rise of 20% from 2019.

The deaths rate increased from March 2020 onwards when the UK's epidemic forced the first national lockdown. But was the pandemic the only contributing factor to the rise in the number of alcohol-specific deaths?

### Lockdown habits

Charities like Drinkaware warned that our changing [drinking habits](#), including consuming more at home, could lead to a sharp rise in people misusing alcohol. However, whether this is the cause of the rise in deaths is unknown.

"There's more work to be done to understand why deaths have increased so starkly," says Dr Richard Piper, chief executive of [Alcohol Change UK](#). "One factor may be that since the pandemic began those already drinking heavily are most likely to have been drinking more. It might also be that some who need help with their drinking, and with alcohol-related conditions, are not seeking it as a result of COVID-19."

Jon Murray, director of services in England at the drug, alcohol and mental health charity [With You](#), says it's difficult to pinpoint any one reason why alcohol deaths rose so drastically last year. One issue may have been people struggling to access health services or alcohol treatment programmes, or avoiding going to A&E in an emergency because of fears over the virus.

Last year, around 80% of those deaths were from alcoholic liver disease and 10% were from mental and behavioural disorders due to alcohol use. Around 6% were the result of accidental poisoning by exposure to [alcohol](#).

### **How does alcohol affect mental health?**

The mental health implications of the pandemic are likely to have played a big role. "Often isolation and heavy drinking go hand in hand, so it's no wonder the enforced isolation of the pandemic has led to some people drinking more," Murray explains.

"Heavy drinking is often a way of dealing with mental health issues, with many of the people we support drinking as a way to cope with past trauma. People can get stuck in a cycle of drinking to deal with mental health issues, with their alcohol use actually exacerbating these issues in the long term. People also drink as a reaction to things going on in their lives."

With many people furloughed, facing redundancy or unable to work, financial problems brought on by the pandemic may have also played a role too. In England, men living in the most deprived areas were four times more likely to die from alcohol than men living in the wealthiest areas, the ONS data showed.

## **Signs of an unhealthy relationship with alcohol**

[Alcohol misuse](#) is when you drink in a way that is harmful or when you're dependent on alcohol. To keep health risks from alcohol to a low level, men and women are advised not to regularly drink more than 14 units a week. Alcohol addiction or dependence, which doctors used to call [alcoholism](#), is a form of problem drinking and describes a strong, often uncontrollable desire to drink.

"There are signs to watch out for if you're concerned that your [drinking is becoming a problem](#)," Piper says. "For example, if you find yourself drinking alcohol earlier in the day than you used to, you are hiding your drinking from others, or you are choosing drinking over your other responsibilities, then it may be time to reach out for help."

Symptoms can also include a lack of interest in previously normal activities, appearing intoxicated more regularly, needing to drink more to get [drunk](#), appearing unwell or irritable or having an inability to say no to alcohol. Another sign of alcohol misuse may be needing a drink in the morning, or forgetting things due to alcohol.

If you're not sure how healthy your drinking is, Alcohol Change UK has a helpful [drinking quiz](#).

## Where to seek help for an alcohol problem

If you are worried about your drinking, your GP is a good place to start. Your doctor may suggest different types of assessment and support options available to you, such as local community alcohol services. You can go directly to your local service too.

"Help is available even during COVID-19 restrictions – you can find out more in Alcohol Change UK's [COVID-19 and alcohol hub](#)," says Piper.

The charity [With You](#), a UK-wide treatment agency, helps individuals, families and communities manage the effects of drug and alcohol misuse. "Seeking support with your drinking can take different forms, either part of a support group or individually," Murray says.

"Our services are warm, non-judgemental spaces and focus on people's full well-being, not just their drinking. Anyone concerned about their drinking can benefit from support; you don't have to have hit rock bottom."

There are also plenty of online options too. [Alcoholics Anonymous UK](#) helps people recover from an alcohol problem, as well as supporting their continued sobriety. Meetings are available online and in person. [Drinkaware](#) also offers support and advice.

"One of the few positives to come out of the pandemic is that there is now a broader range of support options for people around alcohol than ever before," Murray says. "Our webchat service, where people can speak anonymously to a trained advisor, has seen a big boost in numbers in the past year."

And it's important not to feel ashamed about seeking help. "Every one of us can find ourselves drinking harmfully," says Piper. "Every one of us deserves to live a full life free from the harm caused by alcohol, and to have high-quality, early support if we do find ourselves struggling."

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<b>Peer reviewed by:</b> Dr Sarah Jarvis MBE, FRCGP 10/06/2021	

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