

Letter to the editor

Alcohol-related Problems during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The psychosocial distress associated with the COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on the mental health of the population [1]. Symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder were found in 25% of quarantined individuals, and symptoms of psychological distress of varying severity were detected in 40% of the general population [2]. Psychosocial distress and forced idleness in quarantine conditions have caused an increase in the level of alcohol consumption in many countries of the world [1-7].

In the United States, at the height of the pandemic in March 2020, alcohol sales increased by 55% compared to the same period of the previous year [4]. At the same time, the sale of alcohol via the Internet increased by 240% (+75% strong alcohol, +66% wine, +42% beer). In parallel, there has been an increase in the level of domestic violence associated with alcohol consumption. A US study also found that COVID-19-related psychosocial distress is associated with increased levels of alcohol consumption, with this association being more pronounced in women [2].

A Canadian population survey showed an increase in alcohol consumption during the pandemic [3]. The most significant increase was observed among the population aged 35-54 years, while 44% of respondents named high levels of stress as the main reason for the increase in alcohol consumption. Distress provokes an increase in the frequency of drinking, as well as an increase in the amount of alcohol drunk during one drink in both men and women. At the same time, it turned out that women are more susceptible to the distress associated with COVID-19, so they use alcohol more actively for the purpose of self-medication [3].

The results of a study conducted in England suggest that social isolation during lockdown contributes to an increase in the level of alcohol consumption in people with alcohol-related problems, and is also a risk factor for relapse in people suffering from alcohol dependence who are in remission [6]. It has also been shown that in England

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between April and September 2020 there was a sharp increase in alcohol-related mortality [6]. An Australian study found that a significant portion of the population (26.6%) increased their alcohol consumption during the pandemic [5]. It was found that the correlates of the increase in alcohol consumption during this period were: average age; medium or high income; job loss; high levels of depression and stress; chronic heavy drinking in the pre-pandemic period. Another Australian study found that 30.8% of the population drank more alcohol than usual during the pandemic. The correlates of the increase in the level of alcohol consumption were: female gender; high level of income; a history of mental illness; job loss; sleep disorders; change in eating behavior; high levels of depression and distress [2].

A survey of the German population showed that 34.7% of respondents increased their alcohol consumption during the lockdown [7]. The most significant increase in alcohol consumption was observed among those with a low level of education, as well as among those who are most vulnerable to distress. In Russia, at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, sales of vodka and liquor products increased, the number of search queries on the Internet for the delivery of alcohol increased sharply, and there was an increase in mortality from alcohol-related causes [1]. In some countries (Iraq, Belarus, Thailand), a myth has spread that alcohol allegedly protects against COVID infection. The consequences of such misinformation were tragic. In March 2020, more than 180 people died in Iraq as a result of using unlicensed alcohol to prevent COVID [5].

In conclusion, a complex combination of a number of factors, such as social isolation, unemployment, financial problems, has caused an increase in the level of alcohol consumption and, accordingly, the level of alcohol-related problems during the COVID-19 pandemic in many countries of the world. The increase in the level of alcohol-related problems against the background of the pandemic necessitates the implementation of preventive measures, which should be focused primarily on the most vulnerable groups of the population [8].

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