

Supporting Healthy Lives During the COVID-19 Pandemic:
Alcohol Consumption Brief
February 2021

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In my region, alcohol has become the primary substance of choice.

The feeling is that many more people are self-medicating with alcohol and other drugs as a coping mechanism during this time.

...In the past few weeks, there has typically been someone with a blood alcohol level over 400 daily which we only used to see about weekly.

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In response to the increased use of alcohol in New Hampshire during the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, this document includes:

- » Current data related to alcohol access, sales and consumption during the pandemic;
- » Strategies to reduce drinking behavior risks; and
- » Resources to screen, evaluate, treat and support problematic use of alcohol.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, healthcare, behavioral health and community service providers have many roles to play – including continued attention to behavioral health issues. Anxiety levels have increased and depression in the U.S. have tripled during the pandemic¹. Additionally, people have experienced changes related to their work, childcare, family responsibilities and social and professional supports along with increased idle time, stress, and potential isolation. It is well known that traumatic events have historically led to increased use of alcohol due to the stress experienced which motivates people to access their coping strategies.^{2,3,4} Beyond the physical effects of COVID-19, the onset and continuation of the pandemic have understandably affected people's use of substances and mental health in New Hampshire and in the United States. Providers can support healthier levels of alcohol consumption by incorporating harm reduction strategies.

* COVID-19 and Substance Use in New Hampshire Survey Report, Dartmouth-Hitchcock, May 2020



The Center for Excellence on Addiction, a project of JSI Research and Training Institute, Inc., provides training, consultation and other support to professionals working to reduce alcohol and other drug misuse and related consequences.

ALCOHOL ACCESS, SALES & CONSUMPTION DATA:

New Hampshire has experienced changes related to alcohol access, sales and consumption since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

ACCESS:



Beginning in March 2020, the State of New Hampshire through Emergency Order 6⁵ allowed temporary authorization for take-out or delivery of beer or wine. As of December 2020, this order was still in effect. When states allow the sale of take-out or home-delivery of mixed drinks, the risks of underage access and overserving increase. Before the pandemic only two states allowed mixed drinks to-go, now 33 states allow this option.

SALES:



According to the New Hampshire Liquor Commission, alcohol sales have increased about 5.2% in 2020 compared to 2019⁶ with increases seen in the sale of imported, craft and hard seltzer beers. Increased sales may reflect increased consumption, but could also be due to stockpiling and/or sales to out of state residents. This trend in New Hampshire is similar to trends nationwide. Nationally, off-premises alcohol sales increased 55% when comparing the same week in March 2019.⁷ Online sales have also increased, with an increase of 26.2% comparing the last week of April in 2020 to the last week of April 2019.⁸

CONSUMPTION:



It is known that increased consumption leads to increased risk and problems associated with alcohol. A New Hampshire study conducted by Dartmouth-Hitchcock on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on drug use and people who use drugs, based on provider observation, reports a 77.2% increase in alcohol consumption in April 2020 and an 83.6% increase in August 2020.⁹ A national survey conducted by RAND Corporation found that the overall frequency of alcohol consumption increased by 14% among adults over age 30, compared to the same time last year. The increase was 19% among all adults aged 30 to 59, 17% among women and 10% among non-Hispanic White adults. This survey also found women have increased their heavy drinking episodes (four or more drinks within a couple of hours) by 41%.¹⁰

HARM REDUCTION STRATEGIES & RESOURCES FOR ALCOHOL USE:

Given the increased isolation, stress and anxiety people are feeling and the increased access and availability of alcohol, health care and behavioral health professionals can play a critical support role. By having brief conversations about changes to alcohol consumption since COVID-19, providers can work to identify and reduce the harm excessive drinking can cause.

Different strategies and resources are appropriate for different patients. **Most people can use alcohol with minimal negative effects. Others drink more than they had originally intended on a regular basis and can fall into a pattern of problematic alcohol use that can have negative physical, emotional, and social consequences.** Some people are interested in a better understanding of the effects of alcohol and strategies to manage the amount they are drinking, while others are interested in avoiding problems that may relate to their drinking.

Harm reduction for alcohol use “focuses on decreasing the risk and severity of harmful consequences arising from alcohol consumption without necessarily decreasing the level of consumption itself”¹¹. Through this approach, success is measured on reducing the chance that adverse consequences will occur, rather than by the achievement of an “ideal” drinking level or situation (i.e., abstinence or low-risk levels).¹²

Ways to reduce harmful consequences that may arise from drinking ^(13, 14, 15, 16)

- » Eat before drinking, and stay hydrated
- » Give your car keys to your partner or leave them at home before going out
- » Drink at home instead of at an outside location to avoid driving home drunk
- » Avoid drinking to deal with strong emotions
- » Take a limited amount of money to use at the bar or restaurant, and when this amount has been spent, drinking ends for the night

Ways to discuss drinking using Motivational Interviewing:

- » Utilize a compassionate and nonjudgmental approach wherein the primary concern is an individual’s autonomy and absolute worth.
- » Meet the person where they are at and uncover their personal goals.
 - For example, do they perceive their problems as related to alcohol or their significant other? Are they interested in exploring their use of alcohol or not?
- » Understand the person and their reasons for drinking rather than to try to change their drinking which further strengthens their feelings and arguments to keep the status quo. The problems you perceive may not be the problems that the individual perceives. It is important to allow the person to lead the conversation and always reflect back and affirm the person’s strengths.
 - For example, “Tell me what you enjoy about alcohol?” “What don’t you like about your drinking?”

OTHER STRATEGIES & RESOURCES FOR ALCOHOL USE:

SCREEN

STRATEGY Screening is designed to quickly indicate if a person is using alcohol and/or drugs, and if a more detailed conversation is needed about their use of alcohol.

RESOURCES Utilize [validated adult and adolescent screening tools](#).

EVALUATE

STRATEGY An evaluation (or assessment) involves meeting with a trained professional who has training in the treatment of substance use disorders. This clinician assesses and makes recommendations on the types of services and supports that would be most helpful based on the person's needs.

RESOURCES [Dial 2-1-1](#)
 Visit your local [Doorway](#)

TREAT

STRATEGY An array of substance use disorder treatment services are available depending on the needs of a person including outpatient counseling, intensive outpatient services, partial hospitalization, residential services as well as medication.

RESOURCES Connect with a professional who has training in the treatment of substance use disorders for alcohol treatment services ([Dial 2-1-1](#), [Doorway](#) or [BDAS Treatment Guide](#)).
 Speak with a primary care provider if interested in taking medication (acamprosate, disulfiram, naltrexone) ([Pocket Guide](#) & [Brief Guide](#))

SUPPORT

STRATEGY Recovery support services are available for an individual and/or their families to help support recovery and may include peer recovery coaching, care coordination, childcare, transportation, sober housing, and other supports.

RESOURCES Connect with a local Recovery Community Organization ([NH Recovery Hub](#) or [BDAS Recovery Guide](#))
 Engage in online support meetings ([In The Rooms](#), [My Recovery](#), [Other Virtual Supports](#))
 Participate in a family support group which provides support and education to families of individuals affected by substance use ([BDAS Family Support Guide](#)).

OTHER RESOURCES:

- [CDC Guidelines for alcohol use](#)
- [Supporting Access to Alcohol Use Disorder and Alcohol Withdrawal Treatment During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)
- [The ASAM Clinical Practice Guideline on Alcohol Withdrawal Management](#)
- [Taking Care of Your Behavioral Health – Tips for Social Distancing, Quarantine, and Isolation During an Infectious Disease Outbreak](#)
- [Binge Free 603 Campaign](#)

ENDNOTES

- 1 <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/pandemic-related-concerns-associated-with-substance-use>
- 2 https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/wellness/drinking-problem-home-coronavirus-lock-down/2020/04/27/69c45984-865e-11ea-a3eb-e9fc93160703_story.htm
- 3 https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6932a1.htm?s_cid=mm6932a1_w
- 4 <https://www.yalemedicine.org/stories/addiction-amid-covid-19/>
- 5 <https://www.governor.nh.gov/news-media/emergency-orders/documents/emergency-order-6.pdf>
- 6 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYh5pLWOwM&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR0zw8_kP1I5fnjUIpjgyUfxf-wlq-cSSvu7gis_FrhJgpFdTJpshRh7vVU
- 7 https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/wellness/drinking-problem-home-coronavirus-lock-down/2020/04/27/69c45984-865e-11ea-a3eb-e9fc93160703_story.html
- 8 https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/wellness/drinking-problem-home-coronavirus-lock-down/2020/04/27/69c45984-865e-11ea-a3eb-e9fc93160703_story.html
- 9 [COVID-19 and Substance Use in New Hampshire Survey Report, Dartmouth-Hitchcock, May 2020](#)
- 10 https://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2020-09/rc-acr092520.php
- 11 [Single, E. \(1996\). Harm reduction as an alcohol-prevention strategy. Alcohol Health and Research World, 20\(4\), 239.](#)
- 12 <https://filtermag.org/five-harmful-anti-alcohol-myths-and-the-evidence-against-them/>
- 13 <https://filtermag.org/five-harmful-anti-alcohol-myths-and-the-evidence-against-them/>
- 14 <https://filtermag.org/alcohol-harm-reduction/>
- 15 <https://filtermag.org/safer-drinking-coronavirus/>
- 16 <https://pttcnetwork.org/sites/default/files/2020-09/Alcohol%20and%20COVID%20Full%20Slides%20092220.pdf>

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

Addiction Policy Forum. COVID-19 Pandemic Impact on Patients, Families and Individuals in Recovery from Substance Use Disorders. June 9, 2020. <https://www.addictionpolicy.org/covid19-report>

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Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. *SAMHSA Statement Regarding CDC's MMWR on Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. August 14, 2020. <https://www.samhsa.gov/newsroom/press-announcements/202008140930>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. *Drug Abuse Warning Network (DAWN) Alcohol Report*. December 23, 2020. <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/reports/rpt32810/DAWN%20Alcohol%20Profile.pdf>