

The Consequential Increase of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse During Covid- Its Causes and Implications

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ABSTRACT

Covid-19 is not just a virus which is risking human lives everyday, but it is a phenomenon which has inflicted major changes on the long-term global survival and economic strategies. The pandemic has brought about major diversions in the world order, which philosophers and scientists have predicted to occur once in a century's time. Covid-19 has also affected the personal health, physical and psychological of all human beings. It has forced people to change their social behaviors significantly, which has had consequential effect on their mental health. One significant result of the pandemic is the increased consumption of alcohol and other psychoactive substances among people. As people are forced to lock themselves up inside their homes, some have resorted to exercising, biking, running, and meditation to maintain sanity, while others have boosted their addictive behavior by consuming more alcohol and drugs to make staying-indoors more entertaining. Nielsen has reported a 54% rise in the national consumption of alcohol on the week of March 21st 2020, as compared to the same in 2019. The online sales of alcohol have also risen enormously from 2019 to 2020. The study aims to address the problem of increased alcoholism and substance abuse during Covid-19 by understanding the causes of this rise. The method is based on analysis and comparison of available survey reports, to find out exactly what amount of human consumption has increased during the pandemic. From the findings we can conclude that alcoholism and substance abuse has risen significantly during Covid-19, and psychological distress, anxiety and depression can be some major causes for this abnormal social behavior. It can also be implied that this increased alcoholism is likely to affect the physical health, neural and social behavior, and the work life of many human beings through the pandemic.

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Introduction

Covid-19 is one-of-a-kind situations which is predicted to occur once in every hundred years. The last few decades have not witnessed anything major in terms of human health and survival throughout the world. However, a deadly virus named Corona, not only has threatened human lives since the past 18 months, but have significantly affected our daily life schedules, objectives, work lives and social behaviors. One such impact is the increased use of alcohol, drugs and other substances during the pandemic.

Researchers have found that people have indulged in more alcohol and substance usage while staying home away from friends and relatives. Perhaps, they have found a resort in substances to entertain themselves during the lockdown. Since people were forced to practice social distancing, they could not go out to meet their friends, have get-togethers, parties or social gatherings, but they had abundant access to alcohol and drugs through online stores. Those who have great collections of liquor at home, got unrestricted movement to their cellars because they did not have to go out to work anymore. Work-from-home structures were promoted by organizations to maintain social-distancing during Covid. Nielsen has reported a 54% rise in the national consumption of alcohol on the week of March 21st 2020, as compared to the same in 2019 [1]. The online sales of alcohol have also risen by 262% from 2019 to 2020 [1]. such that WHO had to warn the general public on the excessive usage of alcohol

during the pandemic [2]. A scientific research reported that alcohol consumption increased by 0.74 days, i.e., on average, alcohol was consumed one day more in a month by 3 out of 4 adults [2]. An average of 1 day increase per month has also been observed in 1 out of 5 women, from 2019 to 2020 from the study results [2].

Several reasons are being attributed to this change in human social behavior. One of the reasons for this increased consumption can be psychological distress, anxiety and depression which forceful social-distancing has brought about on the human population of the world. Additionally, loss of jobs, non-standard work hours and settings have also disturbed the biological and psychological cycles, which may have accelerated stress in people, motivating them to consume alcohol and other psychoactive substances. The KFF polls during the early phase of Corona virus infection, suggests that about 45% of US adults were convinced that their mental health was negatively impacted by stress over the virus [3]. Over 40 million Americans have lost their jobs during the Covid times [4], and this added anxiety over uncertain situations have pushed many towards alcoholism. Many people are referring to the Spanish Flu while dealing with events of the Corona virus because traces of psychic issues were found among the 1918 influenza virus genes [3].

Other possible reasons attributed to the increased alcoholism and substance abuse is uncompromised access of people to their home bars, online alcohol shops and drug stations. As work-from-home was encouraged by most organizations to maintain social distancing, people found better opportunities to indulge in alcohol consumption even during work hours. This largely

impacts the stakeholders as well as the policy makers of the organizations. Covid has put organizations into critical changes which they are still struggling to adapt to, and one such change is the long-standing drug testing policy [4]. In work-from-home settings, organizations are unable to conduct a face-to-face drug test for their employees, as they have to maintain the Government guidelines for the pandemic, and many people are likely to take advantage of the situation [4].

However, increased alcoholism and substance abuse can cost a lot for people. Employees conducting unethical behavior during work hours with alcoholism are at the risk of losing their jobs. Alcoholism and substance abuse during work can largely impact their productivity, attention span and professional behavior [5]. Also, during uncertain times, those who misuse drugs and alcohol are more vulnerable to the situation in terms of health, professional and personal well-being [6]. Those who consume substances and alcohol may suffer from immunodeficiency, hence may get exposed to the virus which can cost their lives.

Method

The study analyzes the data and reports from different surveys and scientific research to establish the increased use of alcohol and substances during Covid-19 pandemic. One of the major studies conducted on this topic is by Michael Pollard and his team, of RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, California, and Indiana University School of Public Health, Bloomington, Indiana, who studied the pattern of alcohol use, and its consequences on Americans during the Covid-19 pandemic [1]. The study attempted to observe the person-to-person variance in alcoholism and how that impacted American social behavior, as compared to pre-pandemic statistics [1,2]. collected the data using RAND Corporation American Life Panel (ALP), “a nationally representative, probability-sampled panel of 6000 participants age 18 years or more who speak English or Spanish; data are weighted to match a range of national demographic characteristics”, where members provide informed consent annually [2]. The data were collected in two waves where wave 1 included members aged between 30 and 80 years; this wave lasted from April 29 – June 9, 2019. The second wave of data collection was done from May 28 to June 16, 2020, several months after the widespread implementation of social distancing came into being [2]. This sample included 1540 adults aged between 30-59 years, of which 883 were female [2].

Michael and his team found that frequency of alcohol consumption had risen by “0.74 days (95% CI, 0.33-1.15 days), representing an increase of 14% over the baseline of 5.48 days in 2019” [2]. For women, “0.78 days (95% CI, 0.41-1.15 days), representing an increase of 17% over the 2019 baseline of 4.58 days; for adults age 30 to 59 years, 0.93 days (95% CI, 0.36-1.51 days), an increase of 19%; and for non-Hispanic White individuals, 0.66 days (95% CI, 0.14 to 1.17 days), an increase of 10% over the 2019 baseline of 6.46 days” [2]. On an average, one day increase in alcohol consumption per month was observed in 3 out of 4 adults, specifically, 1 out of 5 women catered to this norm [2]. To introduce their topic, the team also referred to the Nielsen report on alcohol sales, where a 54% rise had been observed in the ending week of March 2020 as compared to the same week in 2019 [1]. This clearly indicates that people started resorting to alcohol and substance abuse as a response to social distancing [8].

Another survey conducted by The Human Services Team at Public Consulting Group and the New England Prevention Technology Transfer Center (PTTC) underlined the major challenges in the path of providing substance abuse and mental health services. 92%

of the 144 substance use prevention professionals who responded to the PCG/New England PTTC survey, indicated that they have been able to work from home during the COVID-19 emergency. However, “their most significant challenges are staying connected with stakeholders and partners; transitioning a business model that typically relies on face-to-face client interaction to a virtual platform; and related mental and emotional stress” [9]. This indicates that it is hard to administer any form of counseling to those already addicted to alcohol and substance usage during a remote work-life model, therefore it is also possible that the pandemic has encouraged patients of addiction to practice their behavior.

Discussion

Stress, anxiety and depression can be serious causes for alcoholism and substance abuse. Rates of alcohol use are different across industries and occupations. Jobs that have higher rates of stress or expose employees to greater risks or dangers tend to infuse substance abuse as a defense mechanism in them [6]. Also, non-standard work environments and non-standard work hours may create circadian disruptions or insufficient sleep, which further lead to alcoholism. Covid in itself is a major stress producer [7]. People have been forced to a locked-up environment where he was not conditioned to survive. Social distancing has become a curse for many as people suffer from depression, loneliness and anxiety. In early April 2020, KFF Tracking Poll, conducted March 25-30, 2020, found that 47% of those sheltering in place reported negative mental health effects resulting from worry or stress related to coronavirus. This rate is significantly higher than the 37% among people who were not sheltering in place reporting negative mental health impacts from coronavirus [3]. Additionally, lost jobs and future uncertainties have caused more stress to people who may be using alcohol to protect themselves. Other reasons remain the unregulated employee policy and work-from-home environment during the pandemic situation, which is a major challenge for organizations and stakeholders as it is for the people. However, a whopping rise of 262% in online alcohol sales from 2019 to 2020 [1] clearly proves that alcohol and substance consumption has increased significantly during Covid lockdowns.

Conclusion

Covid-19 lockdowns have eased up the access to alcohol and other kinds of drugs. Online retail stores selling alcohol and drugs have made buying and consuming possible even when stores were closed. Work-from-home structures have enabled people to have access to liquor and other forms of substances even during the day while working which may have notable negative impacts on work ethics, attention span, productivity and delivery. The sales from 2019 to 2020 prove that people have increased their alcohol consumption during Covid lockdowns. While there can be several reasons for this change in social behavior; social anxiety, depression, loneliness and stress over Covid uncertainties can be some of the causes for this addictive disposition of people. However, increased alcoholism during a pandemic can make people more vulnerable to diseases. It can further impact their professional and personal behavior, exposing them to job loss, more loneliness and uncertainty.

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