
Letter to the Editor

Did the General Population in Germany Drink More Alcohol during the COVID-19 Pandemic Lockdown?

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In his review entitled ‘Are patients with alcohol use disorders (AUDs) at increased risk for coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) infection?’, Testino (2020) examines the effect of alcohol consumption on the risk for a severe illness in case of infection by the new coronavirus 2019 [severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2)]. There are relatively good data on the interaction between SARS-CoV-2 and AUD in the existing literature, suggesting that patients suffering from an AUD or alcoholic liver disease are at a greater risk of a severe course of SARS-CoV-2. Testino (2020) suggested therefore that these patients should cut out alcohol consumption completely during the COVID-19 pandemic. In contrast to the interaction between SARS-CoV-2 and AUD, little is known about risks and long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the alcohol drinking behavior and its consequences in the general population.

Like the majority of countries across the world, the government of Germany implemented various restrictions of social life and contacts in all of the 16 partly sovereign states with a difference of a few days, leading to a quarantine-like status (lockdown) in the whole country to contain the spread of COVID-19. Already at the beginning of this lockdown in Germany and all over the world, the World Health Organization (WHO) had warned the general public of the potential risks of increased alcohol consumption during social isolation, which might result in a higher incidence of alcohol use disorders in future.

There are several studies investigating the effects of quarantine on mental health in general, but we found only one study assessing the effects of quarantine and social isolation on alcohol drinking behavior, finding that the number of fulfilled alcohol abuse/dependence diagnosis criteria 3 years after the quarantine took place were

positively associated with the time the persons had been in quarantine (for review see Brooks *et al.*, 2020).

It has been reported in several countries that the COVID-19 lockdown coincided with an increase in online and in-store purchases of alcohol (Chick, 2020).

Based on representative data from the German Consumer Research Association (GfK, 2020), the total revenue in alcoholic beverage in the general population increased significantly by 6.1% compared to the mean of corresponding weeks in the past year. However, it remained unclear, whether this was due to stockpiling, or reflected real changes in alcohol drinking behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To address this question, we investigated the changes in alcohol drinking behavior in the German general population during the time of social restrictions via an anonymous online survey. Out of the 2102 participants of the survey, 8.2% reported to drink no alcohol, 37.7% reported no change in their alcohol drinking behavior, 19.4% reported to drink less or much less and 34.7% reported to drink more or much more alcohol since the begin of the lockdown. Binary logistic regression analyses show that especially low educated subjects and subjects with higher levels of perceived stress due to the lockdown are at risk to consume more alcohol during the lockdown.

These findings suggest that it is important to inform healthcare providers about potential long-term effects of increased alcohol consumption during the lockdown and to prepare support for the vulnerable population. Additionally, there is a need for more research on the interaction of alcohol drinking behavior and COVID-19 pandemic to get a better understanding of the potential long-term effects of the lockdown and develop specific prevention programs for the vulnerable population.

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