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Alcohol abuse rising like COVID

By TINA CHRISTINE L. CHASEK

Alcohol use is a common coping response to stress. Historically, it has increased during times of catastrophic events. The COVID-19 pandemic can be placed in both of those categories.

Has alcohol use increased during COVID? The numbers indicate it has. Alcohol sales have increased nationally by 54 percent since the pandemic hit in March. Even more striking has been the 262 percent increase in online sales of alcohol.

While striking, it's not surprising. One of the first directed health measures issued by the State of Nebraska allowed for curbside sales of alcohol, along with food, to help restaurants during the financially difficult times. Since then, emergency directives have included curbside pickup, delivery and drive-thru drinks to go.

There have been some unintended consequences. Law enforcement officials across the country have noted an increase in alcohol-related

disturbance calls. People who never had substance use problems before find themselves wrestling with new challenges.

In a recent *Journal of the American Medicine* article, "Changes in Adult Alcohol Use and Consequences During COVID-19 Pandemic in the U.S.," researchers found significant increases in alcohol use by adults during the pandemic, especially for women. Not only has women's consumption increased, but researchers also found that 39 percent of women reported experiencing significantly more problems related to their alcohol use.

What is fueling this "pandemic drinking" phenomenon? Anxiety, loneliness and boredom are the likely culprits. "Quarantinis," COVID Day drinking games and Zoom Happy Hour(s) have become popular on social media during social distancing. The home bar is a place to visit when you are feeling cooped up, anxious, lonely or tired of the constant bad news of 2020. There



is no last call when you are your own bartender.

But how much is too much? That depends on a variety of factors, including body weight and gender, but generally "moderate" alcohol consumption means one to two drinks per day for men, and one drink per day for women. It's important to note that one drink means 12 ounces of beer, 5 ounces of wine or 1.5 ounces of distilled spirits. Larger portions equal more standard drinks.

Problematic drinking also

includes binge drinking, or four or more drinks for women and five or more drinks for men in a two-hour period. Alcohol is fine in moderation. However, for those who exceed the guidelines, or for those with substance use problems, serious issues can occur, such as liver disease, obesity, cancer, depression, suicide, accidents, cardiovascular problems, high blood pressure, stroke and heart attack. Not to mention a whole range of emotional and social problems.

If you find yourself excessively drinking, or worry about someone who might be, there are ways to get help. Reach out to people you trust to talk through your concerns. Behavioral health providers can offer confidential services. These providers and other resources can be found on the Buffalo County Community Partners webpage. Don't go through this alone.

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