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WSU study: Post-lockdown changes in alcohol use cause increased stress

Research used 900 pairs of twins across Washington

By Scott Jackson, Daily News staff writer
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One in 4 adults said they changed their level of alcohol consumption immediately after COVID-19 shutdown orders were put in place, according to a recent study by Washington State University.

Researchers said a key revelation of the study, which surveyed about 900 pairs of fraternal and identical twins in Washington, was that all those who reported a change in their alcohol consumption also reported experiencing more stress and anxiety than those with no change or who did not drink alcohol at all.

Ally Avery, a scientific operations manager at WSU's College of Medicine and lead author on the paper, said early in the pandemic, public health authorities predicted there was the potential for a rise in alcohol abuse but few anticipated behavioral changes would take place immediately. She said these data show that negative effects of such could manifest much more quickly than expected.

She said the survey did not ask respondents why groups that increased and decreased alcohol consumption both felt heightened levels of stress, but it's not difficult to extrapolate.

"It's possible that the twins drinking more are drinking more to help with those feelings of stress, since there's research that has shown that alcohol use does increase during stressful times," she said. "Then, for the people drinking less, it's possible they aren't able to go out to drink after work, because they're working remotely and bars are shut down and so that causes a different kind of stress not being able to go and socialize."

Avery said the survey was issued the week after Washington Gov. Jay Inslee ordered statewide shutdowns of restaurants, bars and entertainment venues in mid-March and collected data for about two weeks. Avery said 14 percent of respondents reported drinking more and 11 percent reported

drinking less but both groups said they experienced an increase in stress and anxiety. She said 35 percent said they did not use alcohol at all and 39 percent reported no change.

By studying twins, who share a great deal of genetic material and have similar life experiences, Avery said researchers are able to rule out a genetic cause for changes in stress and focus on behavioral changes. Tellingly, she said in identical twins, who have identical genes, the twin that reported drinking more or less reported they were significantly more stressed than the twin who did not change their behavior

“For identical twins, we would assume that they would have similar levels of stress despite the differences in same alcohol use versus an increase or decrease,” she said. “But since they were more stressed, it’s showing that that alcohol use that’s unique to that twin really is causing an increase in stress.”

Avery said the next question that must be answered is whether or not these trends will continue, even if life were to return to some semblance of normal. She said other “longitudinal” surveys conducted every three to four years will help researchers ascertain whether there will be any long-term effects on behavior or anxiety levels into the future.

She said this is a rare opportunity to study the psychological and behavioral impacts of large scale events on populations and could help humanity to better prepare for coming crises.

“It’s such a unique situation — nobody alive really has been through a pandemic like this so it’ll be really interesting to see what kind of impact it has had on people’s health long-term,” Avery said. “Alcohol use can lead to all sorts of poor outcomes and then stress and anxiety can also cause a lot of adverse health outcomes so understanding the impact that this had will be really important for if or when this happens again in the future.”

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