

Doctor urges alcohol moderation during pandemic to maintain a healthy immune system

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While it may be tempting to drink more while quarantined at home, a Loyola Medicine doctor is urging moderation, as too much alcohol can diminish the body's ability to fight off infections like COVID-19.

Majid Afshar, MD, a pulmonologist and critical care specialist and assistant professor at Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine, has studied the [effects of alcohol](#) on the body's [immune system](#), as well as its impact on breathing and lung health. He warns that excessive alcohol use (at least four or five drinks over a few hours) can alter our cytokine response, or signaling proteins, which regulate the body's [immune response](#).

One of Dr. Afshar's published studies, "[Acute immunomodulatory effects of binge alcohol ingestion](#)," found that "a single episode of binge alcohol intoxication exerted effects on the immune system that caused an early and transient pro-inflammatory state followed by an anti-inflammatory state." These fluctuations in inflammation can affect the [hormone levels](#), as well as the body's ability to fight and heal from disease.

As little as two drinks a day for women and three drinks per day for men begins to "dysregulate our immune system. Alcohol does affect our frontline of defense, altering homeostasis (the body's equilibrium) that is ideal for fighting infections like COVID-19," says Dr. Afshar.

"We are in the midst of a pandemic," says Dr. Afshar. "Those of us who do get sick are going to have to rely on our immune system to get through this. This is especially important for our most [vulnerable populations](#)"—the elderly, as well as anyone with diabetes, or heart, lung, and immune diseases and disorders.

Alcohol can also increase the number and severity of respiratory infections. The COVID-19 virus can lead to respiratory complications, especially in individuals with an alcohol use disorder.

"High levels or unhealthy levels of alcohol consumption are not helpful for our immune system and impairs our ability to fight off infections,"

said Dr. Afshar.

"I wouldn't say stop drinking altogether. But minimize and drink in moderation. Let's do everything we can to stay healthy and protect ourselves.

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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