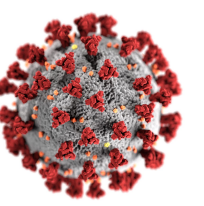


# Alcohol Withdrawal and Implicated Deaths During the Early COVID-19 Pandemic: Case Report and International Literature Review



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## The case:

- 36yo man, daily heavy alcohol use with recent prior hospitalization for withdrawal presents to NYC hospital with hallucinations and confusion
- Alcohol withdrawal suspected (vs alcohol hallucinosis), admitted to medicine for detoxification
- Telepsychiatry consulted for hallucinations, recommended ongoing withdrawal management
- Overnight i/s/o hallucinations and paranoia, overcame security watch, threw chair through glass, jumped from 5th floor of downtown hospital
- Survived, transferred uptown for emergent surgery
- CL followed, initially on SUI 1:1, low dose quetiapine given for mild delirium and paranoia
- Quick physical recovery, soon after psychiatrically cleared for acute rehabilitation
- No resurgence of psychotic symptoms, have continued quetiapine and started antidepressant
- Pursued alcohol rehab out of state after discharge from acute physical rehab

## AUD by the numbers:

- In 2003, 8.2mil people in the USA were dependent on alcohol,<sup>1</sup> up to 14.5mil with AUD by 2019<sup>2</sup>
- The rate of all alcohol related ED visits increased 47% from 2006 to 2014
- Third leading cause of preventable death in the US
- In 2019, only 7.2% of people ages 12+ with AUD received any treatment in the past year

## Severe alcohol withdrawal:

- S/p cessation of EtOH consumption, commonly includes hallucinations, seizures, and/or DTs
- SoC inpatient treatment includes monitoring with a validated withdrawal-symptom scale (ie CIWA-Ar) and GABAergic medications dosed on front-loading, symptom-triggered, or fixed and tapered dose schedule (benzos)<sup>1</sup> + nutrition support

## What about COVID-19?

- In May 2020, the Lancet called on the US government to warn the public about the dangers of excessive alcohol consumption during isolation<sup>3</sup>
- 20-40% of surveyed individuals in the US have reported consuming more alcohol than usual during the pandemic<sup>4</sup>
- Initial India literature review (July 2021) suggests an increase in alcohol related emergencies overall, including alcohol withdrawal syndrome (AWS) and related suicides<sup>5</sup>

## Alcohol withdrawal: pandemic effects?

### USA:

- In NYC during March-May 2020, alcohol withdrawal hospital visits increased while alcohol use visits decreased<sup>6</sup>
  - Increased withdrawal numbers thought to possibly relate to attempts to embrace healthier lifestyles and/or fear of travel
- PA liquor stores closed March 17 - August 21, 2020<sup>7</sup>:
  - AWS ED consults compared pre-pandemic to closure period, no statistical difference
  - However, nearly 2.5x odds of requiring a return ED visit during closure

### India:

- Alcohol sales banned from March to April 2020 (21 days)
- Daily cases of severe AWS briefly doubled (Fig. 1)<sup>8</sup>

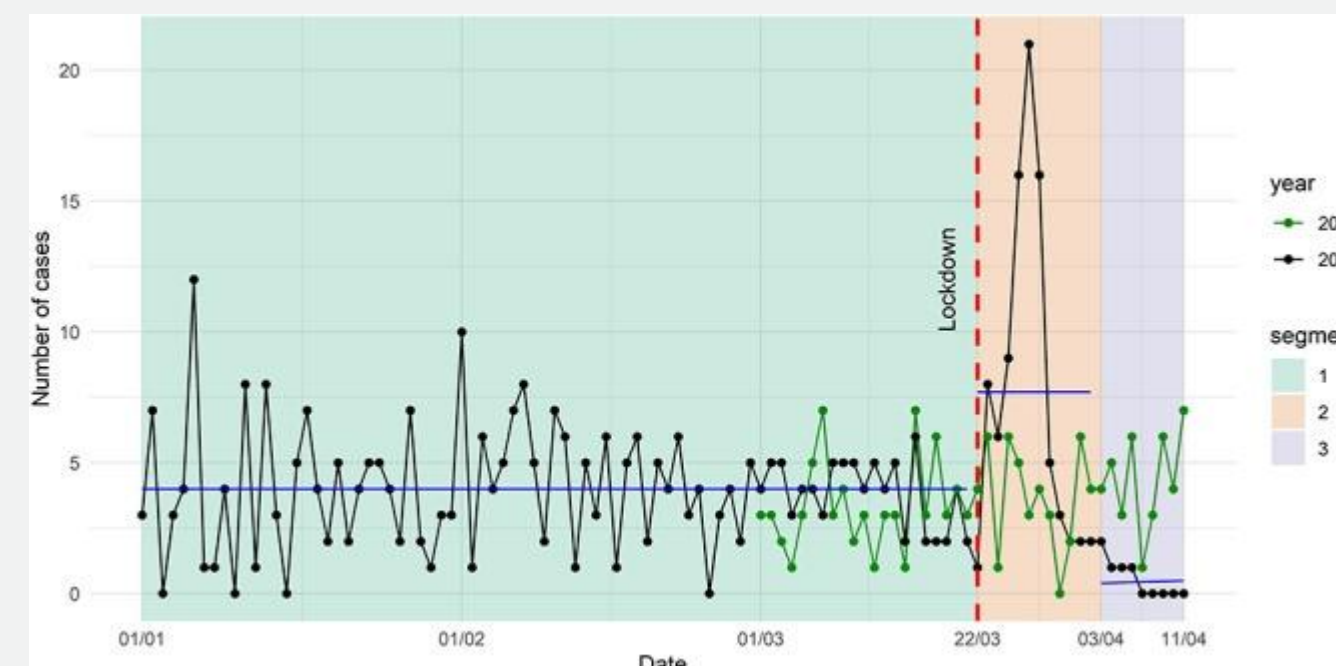


Fig. 1. Change in number of severe alcohol withdrawal syndrome cases seen in a Bangalore, India ED.<sup>8</sup>

### Australia:

- May 2020 paper warned that people who use substances may prioritize substance use over other health concerns and pushed increasing outpatient and tele-services for mild-moderate AWS to bolster inpatient settings<sup>9</sup>

### South Africa:

- Claims that more lives were saved from alcohol-related causes during alcohol ban than lives lost to COVID-19<sup>10</sup>

## AWS + COVID-19 implicated death data:

### India:

- From March 25 to May 5, 2020, 23 men completed suicide due to AWS<sup>11</sup>
- International authors sought to verify these suicides<sup>12</sup> and found 26 reports:
  - o All reported cases were men
  - o Consumption of a poisonous liquid was the most common method
  - o One additional attempted suicide, a 46yo man who jumped from a building and survived
  - o **Are these implicated deaths clearly suicides?**

## Summary:

- Countries all over the world had COVID-19 lockdowns (+/- alcohol access), variable effects:
  - Short term: decreased alcohol use visits in the USA, more AWS visits in the USA and India
    - Other parts of the world claiming that reduced alcohol access saved lives
  - Long term: unclear
- India media reporting increase in suicide, unclear if significant or generalizable

## What should be done?

- Alcohol reduction **educational programs** should be implemented during the remainder of the pandemic<sup>13</sup>
- Development of mechanisms that *can withstand crises* is warranted to both improve harm reduction and promote linkage to treatment<sup>7</sup>



Sean McKeag/AP Images<sup>4</sup>

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