Need for Liver Transplants Due to Alcohol Use Spiked During COVID-19 Pandemic

Heavy alcohol use during the pandemic was linked to a rise in waiting list registrations and transplants due to alcohol-related hepatitis.

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Liver transplants and waiting list registrations due to alcohol-related liver disease (ALD) increased during the COVID-19 pandemic in association with a rise in retail alcohol sales, according to study results published in JAMA Network Open.

Alcohol drinking has soared during the pandemic. Alcohol-related liver disease, driven by excessive alcohol consumption, can lead to cirrhosis, liver cancer and liver failure. Maia Anderson, MD, of Michigan Medicine, and colleagues looked at national changes in the number of people with ALD who were put on a waiting list or received a transplant and the potential links to alcohol sales in recent years.

Anderson's team searched the United Network for Organ Sharing Standard Transplant Analysis and Research database for new waiting list registrations and deceased donor liver transplants from January 2016 to January 2021. They also analyzed alcohol sales figures during the same period using data from the U.S. Census Bureau Monthly Retail Trade Report.

Between January 2016 and January 2021, a total of 51,488 adults were placed on liver transplant waiting lists and 32,320 transplants were carried out. During the pandemic, from March 2020 to January 2021, the researchers saw significant increases in the proportion of waiting list registrations (from 1.4% to 2.4%) and transplants (from 1.6% to 3.0%) due to ALD compared with the pre-pandemic period spanning March 2019 to January 2020.

Waiting list registrations and transplants due to ALD dropped early in the pandemic, from March to May 2020, as many medical procedures were restricted. But from June 2020 to January 2021, these numbers soared, with registrations exceeding predictions by 60% and transplants by 62%. The researchers noted a link between alcohol sales and increasing registrations and transplants due to ALD.

"While we cannot confirm causality, this study provides evidence for an alarming increase in

alcoholic hepatitis associated with known increases in alcohol misuse during COVID-19," Anderson said in a press release. "And it highlights the need for public health interventions around excessive alcohol consumption."

Click here to read the study in JAMA Network Open.

Click here to learn more about alcohol-related liver disease.

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