



The impact of COVID-19 on drug and alcohol use

In this report, we investigate general trends in drug and alcohol usage and associated behaviours, reveal what our own testing data is showing, and take a look at what COVID-19 is likely to mean for drug and alcohol usage and testing in the future.

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Introduction

An article from The Lancet in April 2020 linked controls out in place to reduce the spread of COVID-19 – social distancing and isolation for those who need it – with a potential rise in alcohol-related issues.



The author's fear was that such isolation could lead to "a spike in alcohol misuse, relapse and potentially, development of alcohol disorders in at-risk individuals, therefore placing further strain on addiction and drug and alcohol services, and the health service in general, during and after the pandemic".

It's also worth noting that this misuse could also increase the risk of exposure to and the catching of the virus. Recreational drug and alcohol users are likely to do so in social settings, and may engage in 'risky' behaviour, ignoring social distancing rules and increasing their likely exposure to the virus. They may also find their immune systems weakened as a result of losing sleep, drinking alcohol and smoking tobacco or cannabis while taking recreational drugs.

In short, COVID-19-related restrictions could increase drug and alcohol misuse, while drug and alcohol misuse can also contribute to increased exposure to COVID-19.

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The impact of COVID-19 on drug and alcohol use

A number of reports found that drug and alcohol purchase and usage have apparently changed:

Addiction services need greater funding

In mid-September, the Royal College of Psychiatrists analysed Public Health England data to reveal that over 8.4 million people are now drinking at a higher level of risk – a rise from 4.8 million in February. They warned that this has left addiction services struggling to cope with the higher volumes of support and treatment that are required – and also warned that those with alcohol use disorder – as well as those using drugs like benzodiazepines and heroin – are at higher risk of developing serious complications should they catch COVID-19.

Alcohol sales increased

Data from the Commission on Alcohol Harms and the Alcohol Health Alliance revealed that alcohol sales rose by 67% before lockdown began. Similarly, the ONS reported a 31.4% surge in sales volumes in March for alcohol-focused retailers, while Nielsen revealed that the value of beer, wine and spirits sales rose by 41% in a month in the middle of the year, despite pubs reopening.

Drinking behaviours have changed

An interim report from the Global Drug Survey (GDS) in early June revealed that COVID-19 and the ensuing lockdown have changed people's drinking habits. Nearly 47% of Britons who drink stated that they had been drinking earlier in the day since lockdown started – a figure that was higher than for the majority of other nations included in the survey. In addition, over 50% of Britons revealed that they had increased the number of days on which they drink, with a third of British respondents also reporting an increase in binge drinking.

Reasons given for these changes in drinking behaviour included boredom and having more available time to drink, while many also reported negative consequences of these changes in behaviour. Over 40% stated that their physical health had declined as a result, while many also reported decreases in work performance, mental health and the pleasure gained from drinking.

Obtaining illegal drugs became harder

Through a combination of the drop in global travel, restrictions at border control and strict rules on travel within the UK, The Guardian reported in April that both border guards and senior police forces had noticed a drop in the seizure and supply of illicit drugs.

However, while authorities were seeing drops in drugs such as heroin and spice, there was a fear that drug users would turn to other, potentially more dangerous, substances – such as fentanyl – instead. Moreover, it was predicted that the price of certain drugs would increase, and that purity would decrease, as dealers cut drugs with other substances to make them go further.

The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction reported that because Law enforcement activities were affected by the pandemic, fewer drug law offences were reported, “reflecting a shift in policing priorities towards ensuring public safety.”



Fears over changes in drug use patterns

In May, Professor Adam Winstock, founder and director of the Global Drug Survey, expressed his fears that some recreational drug users could potentially see a harmful shift in their behaviours:

He stated a belief that lockdown could have such a devastating effect on the mental health of some casual cannabis and cocaine users that could lead to them using these substances more frequently – or even switch to other drugs when they run out. Professor Winstock's fear was that the risk of dependency or overdose would rise as a result, causing greater issues to individuals and putting further strain on an already stretched treatment system.

Calls to reclassify magic mushrooms

North Wales Police and Crime Commissioner, Arfon Jones, has written to the region's MPs to call for psilocybin – one of the main psychotropic compounds found in magic mushrooms – to be reclassified from its current status as a Class A drug. He cites a growing amount of evidence that suggests that psilocybin could be used as a successful solution for treatment-resistant depression: a leading cause of suicide, and particularly concerning with COVID-19 still present.

However, psilocybin is generally not included in a standard screening panel, and would only be included in a drug test if it was a concern.



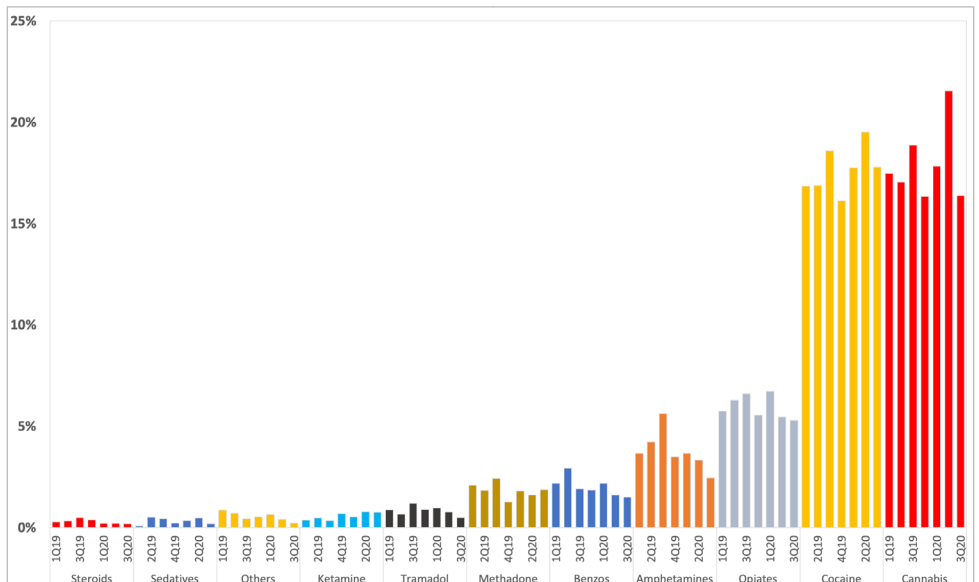
COVID-19 & substance misuse: The Cansford view

Many of the samples we receive through the laboratory are from individuals belonging to an 'at-risk' group and they may be being monitored over a time period.

Monitoring can be especially important during times of high stress, where there is concern that the population as a whole may be more susceptible to substance abuse.

For positivity rate, cannabis and cocaine share the pole position, followed by opiates, then amphetamines and benzodiazepines. When grouped by drug group, our results are fairly consistent over time.

Positivity rates for main drug groups across all sectors 2019 and 2020



The impact of COVID-19 on drug and alcohol use

Cannabis remains the most widely misused illegal recreational drug in the UK. It is often seen as a young person’s drug, but reports suggest otherwise. According to Home Office statistics on drug use (produced in 2018), 7.2 per cent of adults aged 16 to 59 have used cannabis in the last year. The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction reports that cannabis use during European lockdowns appears to be the least affected by the ability to smuggle substances into a region.

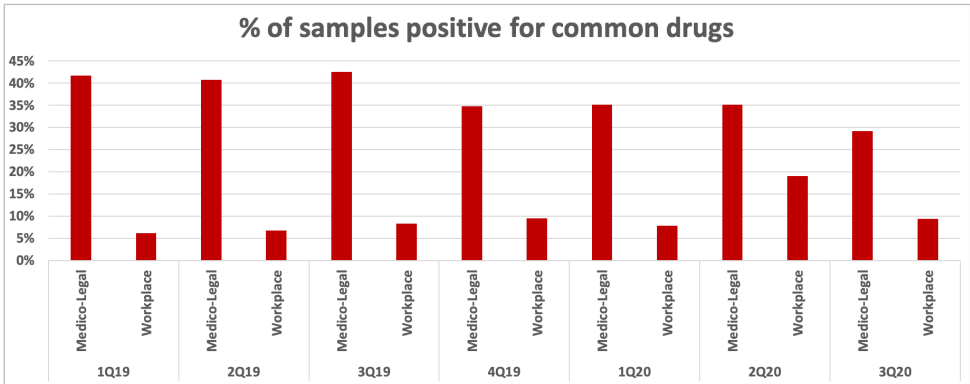
Over the last decade, cocaine misuse amongst the general population has been on the rise. Prior to this year’s nationwide lockdown it had become

easier to source, cheaper to buy and available in purer forms than it used to be. As cocaine has become more frequently used by wider society, the number of people facing health complications from its use has grown. According to the Office for National Statistics, there were 432 deaths related to cocaine in England and Wales in 2017. Fatalities often come from heart failure or strokes.

When we analysed the difference in positivity rates between medico-legal and workplace testing, we did notice a significant difference. We will explore these in more detail in the following sections.

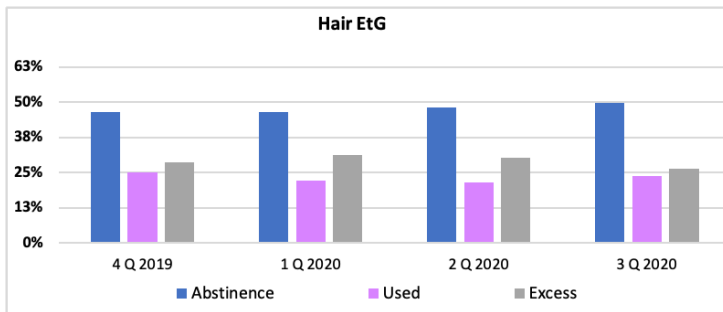
“Cannabis remains the most widely used illegal recreational drug in the UK”

Cansford’s workplace and medio-legal testing positivity rates

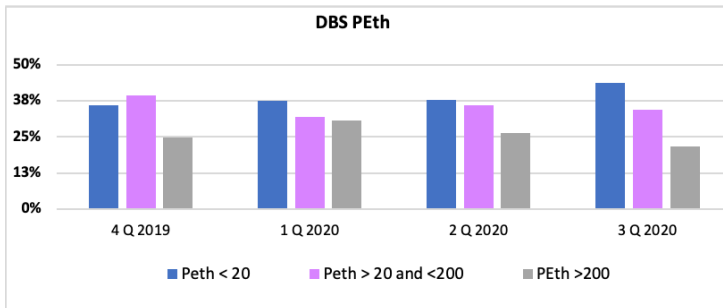


Alcohol monitoring

For a view of positivity rates over the year, we looked at our detection rates for ethyl glucuronide (EtG), a biomarker of alcohol consumption that can be detected in hair – and dry blood spot to measure phosphatidylethanol (PEth), a direct alcohol biomarker found in human blood following alcohol consumption.



Charts showing Cansford's positivity rates for EtG and PEth



A hair strand test is one of the most accurate testing options for both drugs and alcohol. This testing method can detect levels of alcohol and drugs in an individual's hair anywhere between seven days and six months after use, making it ideal for establishing usage history, and for regular testing to determine whether usage is increasing or decreasing.

EtG is a direct marker of alcohol consumption and is only produced when a person has consumed alcohol or has increased blood alcohol levels. We looked at data for excess, use and abstinence. Cansford's LC-MS can detect levels below 5 pg/mg, a result consistent with abstinence.

Our PEth finger prick tests measures the level of alcohol biomarker PEth in an individual's system and can distinguish between whether an individual is an occasional drinker, a moderate drinker, or drinks to excess.

It can be used in conjunction with a hair test to provide a view of the last month's alcohol consumption, or as a standalone monitoring test on a monthly basis to monitor patterns of consumption.

Overall, our data for alcohol testing has remained consistent in lockdown with previous quarters in the groups. We consider the consistency of data during the lockdown period to be reassuring for those using our monitoring services to monitor and manage alcohol misuse.

Despite the concern in the media, we have yet to see a 'spike' in excessive use of alcohol amongst those being tested by Cansford over the period of national lockdown.

Medico-legal

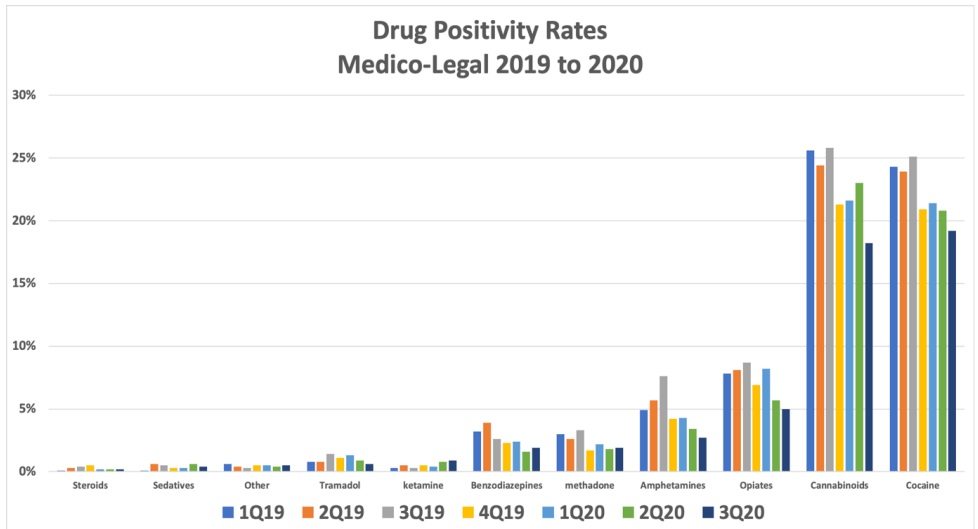
Many of the cases of medico-legal testing that pass through our labs relate to child protection. Social services may seek drug and alcohol testing if child welfare claims have been made regarding suspected substance misuse. There may have been a substance abuse claim against a parent fighting for custody or visitation.

Hewitts Solicitors have published data that shows that their incoming divorce enquiries have risen by 42% since lockdown began, compared with the same period in 2019. They cite the pressure that lockdown has placed on many couples (some of whom may already have had difficulties in their relationships) – as well as the financial and mental health-related stresses of the pandemic – as

catalysts for these enquiries. Accusations of drug and alcohol misuse often accompany divorce and child custody proceedings.

We've already included some of the reports on increases in drug and alcohol in the general population. So clearly, those who already belong to an at-risk group may be particularly vulnerable during such difficult times.

In the medico-legal sector, our positivity rate since the start of lockdown in March has remained at around 25% across all common drug groups, with patterns remaining consistent both prior to and during the pandemic.



In family law, drug tests will generally be conducted only if there is either a history of usage, or the suspicion of current usage. For this reason, it is likely that the percentage of results that are positive will be greater than in workplace testing programmes.

As can be seen in the chart on the previous page, our tests in the medico-legal sector are showing consistent results for all common drug groups. We are also seeing consistency in terms of the substances we detect most often in family law cases. Cannabis is the drug with the highest number of positive tests, with cocaine second. These two substances alone make up over 40% of the positive samples we tested last year.



Workplace testing

Since the start of the pandemic an increasing number of people have been working from home. For those whose workplace drug and alcohol testing policy includes the use of random drug tests for employees, there will have been some respite in the last six months, with such tests not being carried out.

Some of the companies we have been speaking to intend to continue allowing employees to work from home for the foreseeable future. They are now looking into whether it is a viable option to extend random drug testing to the home environment and, if so, how to do so in the most accurate way possible.

We have recently seen a resumption of pre-employment testing which marks a concerted effort to discourage the recruitment of staff with a history of substance misuse. More employers are now evaluating hair testing for pre-employment, which reveals a much broader window of drug use than a standard urine test.

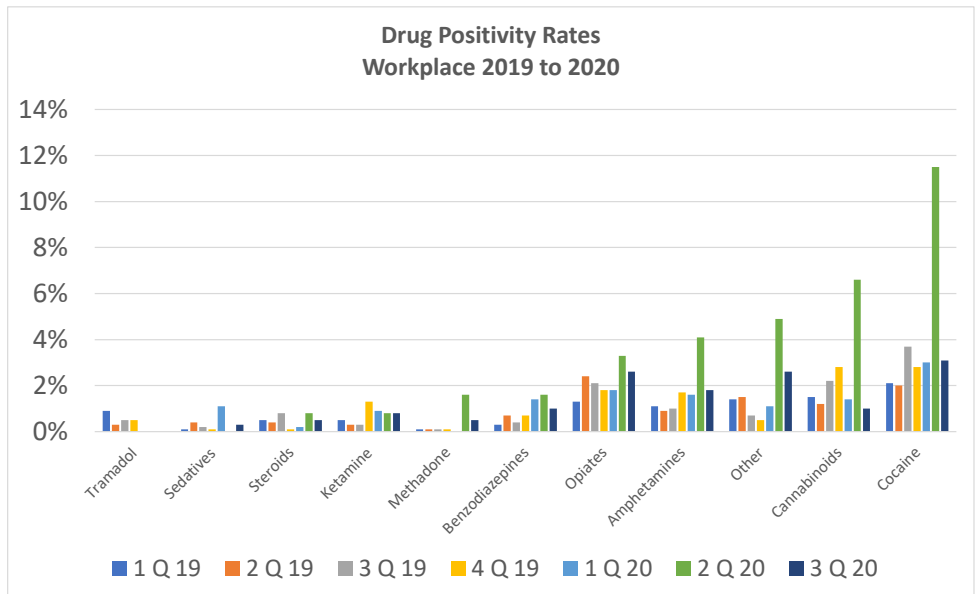
With so many businesses still working from home, it may, as yet, be too early to tell if COVID-19 has had any real significant impact on drug and alcohol usage at work.

However, not all sectors have been able to work from home during the pandemic. Logistics teams, retail workers, construction teams, security staff, medical employees and many others have, by the nature of their roles, been required to maintain 'business as usual' – which means that employers in these sectors have been able to continue with existing workplace policies.

For this reason, we have continued to conduct workplace drug tests throughout the pandemic – and have seen some interesting results.

Even before COVID-19, it was cocaine and cannabis that were the substances detected in the majority of our workplace drug tests. During the pandemic, this is still the case – but in Q2 2020, we actually saw a spike in positive test results for both drugs across all workplace sectors.

The workplace sector shows less than 10% of the samples positive, except for highlighted in the 2 Q 20 when it doubled – showing spikes across methadone, opiates, amphetamines, cannabinoids, cocaine and an assortment of other drug groups.



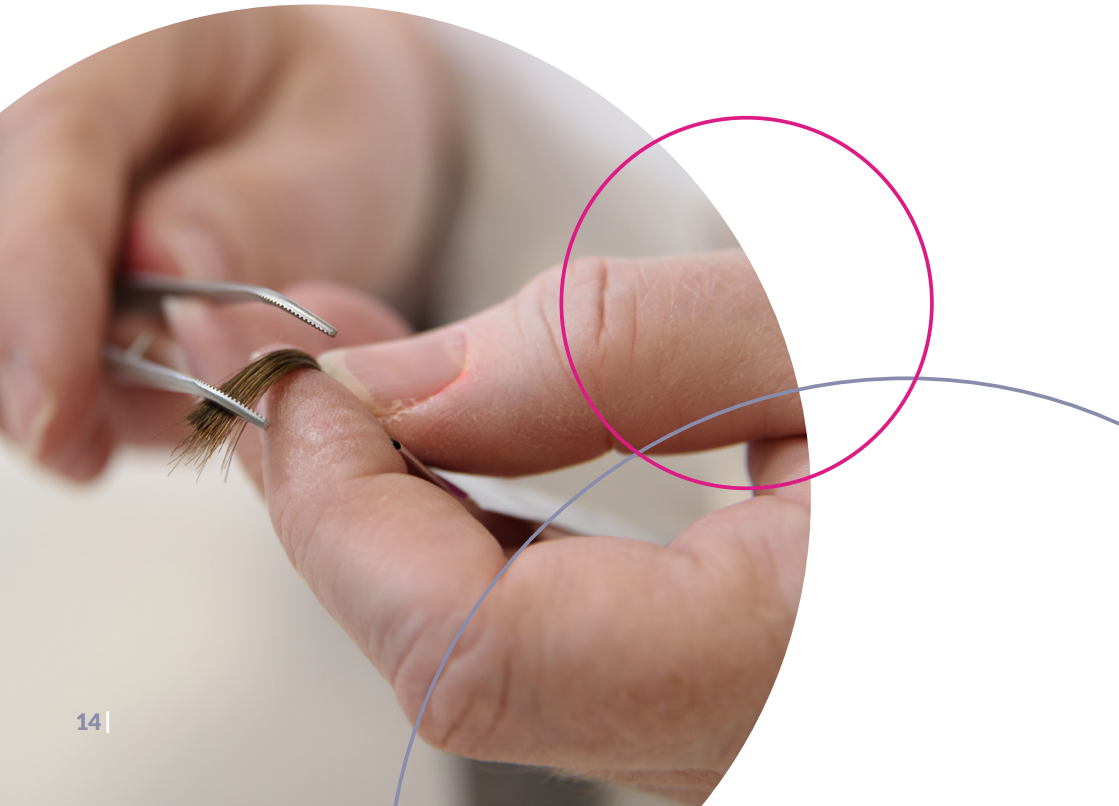
The impact of COVID-19 on drug and alcohol use

These results tie in with the predicted mental health effects of COVID-19, but could also point to the difference between various drug and alcohol testing methods.

While many businesses choose to take urine samples for random drug tests, these will only show substance use in the few days before the test. Hair, on the other hand, can give an accurate picture of drug and alcohol usage over multiple months. This means that companies can get a clear picture of what employees may have been doing while not in the workplace.

There are a reduction of positive results in Q3.

“The workplace sector shows less than 10% of the samples positive, except for highlighted in the 2 Q 20 when it doubled”



Implications for the future

It appears that the supply of certain substances remains fairly constant, with drug users still able to access the substances of their choice.

The spikes we have seen in workplace drug testing, abating in Q3 could well become more prominent as local lockdowns increase once again, while the increase in divorce enquiries could see a greater demand for drug and alcohol testing in the near future.

With those who misuse drugs or alcohol potentially more likely to gain exposure to or suffer more serious side effects from COVID-19, it is vital that changes in drug and/or alcohol misuse are picked up quickly and dealt with in the appropriate manner – not only to protect individuals and their families or workplaces, but also to reduce the strain on the UK's healthcare services.

Drug and alcohol services should remain open and operational to protect vulnerable people, while still following government regulations where PPE, checking for COVID-19 symptoms, hygiene, isolation and more are concerned.

Drug and alcohol testing should continue throughout this time (laboratories like ours have new measures to remain safe during the pandemic) to establish both current substance use as well as changes in usage patterns: by uncovering and treating drug and alcohol misuse problems as early as possible, we can, together, reduce the strain on the NHS, help individuals to get the support they need, and reduce their likelihood of being exposed to or developing serious alcohol and drug-related complications of COVID-19.

“... by uncovering and treating drug and alcohol misuse problems as early as possible, we can, together, reduce the strain on the NHS ...”



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