

Issues up close

Alcohol screening and brief intervention: A clinical solution to a vital public health issue

What is risky alcohol use and why is it important to health?

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RISKY OR EXCESSIVE alcohol use is common, expensive, and underrecognized as a significant public health problem. It's also not addressed adequately in healthcare settings. At least 38 million U.S. adults drink too much. Drinking too much includes binge drinking, high weekly alcohol consumption, and any drinking by those under age 21 or pregnant women. Risky alcohol use cost the United States \$224 billion in 2006. It's the third-leading preventable cause of death, contributing to a wide range of negative health and social consequences, including motor vehicle crashes, intimate partner violence, and fetal alcohol spectrum disorders. Over time, it can result in serious medical conditions, such as hypertension, gastritis, liver disease, and various cancers. Despite alarming statistics and serious health and societal harms, healthcare providers don't routinely talk with their patients about alcohol use.

Understanding how much drinking is too much isn't widely understood by the public or healthcare providers. Most people think that drinking too much means that a person is an alcoholic or alcohol dependent. However, data show that only about 4% of adults are alcohol dependent and another 25% aren't dependent but drink in ways that put themselves and others at risk of harm.

Definitions of excessive drinking in the United States are shown in the graphic below. Also important, consuming more than one drink a day for women or more than two drinks a day for men has been shown to have negative health effects. In addition to pregnant women and those under the legal drinking age, any consumption is too much for individuals who are dependent on alcohol or unable to control the amount of alcohol they drink. Furthermore, alcohol is contraindicated with many medications. Therefore, individuals

Drinking too much includes



For men, binge drinking is **5 or more drinks** consumed on one occasion*



For women, binge drinking is **4 or more drinks** consumed on one occasion*

*One occasion = within 2 to 3 hours



For men – **15 or more drinks** on average per week



For women – **8 or more drinks** on average per week

One Drink = 5-ounces of wine, 12-ounces of beer, or 1 ½-ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits or liquor

Drinking too much includes



Any alcohol use by pregnant women



Any alcohol use by those **under age 21**

Source: CDC. www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/alcohol-screening-counseling/infographic.html

taking certain prescription drugs, those who have medical conditions that can be made worse by alcohol, and persons driving, planning to drive, or doing other activities that require skill, alertness, and coordination should limit or abstain from alcohol use.

What can be done?

Alcohol screening and brief intervention (SBI) is an effective, quick, and inexpensive clinical preventive service that can reduce the amount a person drinks per occasion by 25%. The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF), multiple federal agencies, and other health organizations have recommended that alcohol SBI be implemented for all adults in primary healthcare settings (including pregnant women) due to strong evidence of its effectiveness. Furthermore, in 2011 the American Nurses Association released a revised position statement supporting nonpunitive alcohol and drug treatment for pregnant and breastfeeding women and their exposed children.

What is alcohol screening and brief intervention?

Alcohol SBI is a preventive service similar to hypertension or tobacco screening. It identifies and provides help to patients who may be drinking too much. It includes:

- a validated set of screening questions to identify patients' drinking patterns. These can be administered orally or on a form. The USPSTF recommends the use of the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT, U.S. version), the brief three-question version of this measure called the AUDIT-C, or a single-question screener for heavy drinking days (such as, "How many times in the past year have you had five or more drinks in a day [for men] or four drinks [for women]?")
- a short conversation with patients who drink too much. Generally, a conversation of 6 to 15 minutes is effective for a brief intervention. For the small percentage of patients who are alcohol dependent, a referral to treatment is provided as needed.

Alcohol SBI can be integrated into a routine medical visit. The four key steps to keep in mind when performing this service are the following:

1. Ask the patient about his or her drinking using a validated screening instrument. If the patient reports drinking more than the levels indicated in the graphic or the cut-offs for the screening instrument, conduct a brief intervention as described below.
2. Talk with the patient, using plain language, about what he or she thinks is good and not so good about their drinking.
3. Provide options by asking the patient if he or she wants to stop drinking, cut down, seek help, or continue with the current drinking pattern. Based

on the results of this discussion, help the patient come up with a plan.

4. Close on good terms, regardless of the patient's response.

How can nurses intervene?

Nurses are trusted healthcare providers and are uniquely positioned to provide and change practice in many settings. In fact, a number of studies report that nurses providing alcohol SBI have had excellent results.

To actively promote implementation of alcohol SBI, nurses can:

- become familiar with levels of risky drinking
- understand and share with others how well alcohol SBI works
- learn how to conduct alcohol SBI with patients effectively
- champion and support the integration of alcohol SBI into routine primary care.

Available resources

A number of excellent resources are readily available online on how to conduct alcohol SBI. Two helpful resources developed by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism include "Helping Patients Who Drink Too Much: A Clinician's Guide" and a booklet and website called "Rethinking Drinking" (<http://rethinkingdrinking.niaaa.nih.gov>).

Although individual nurses or other healthcare professionals should conduct alcohol SBI, implementation planning for their specific healthcare settings is needed to make it routine. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have developed step-by-step implementation guides for alcohol SBI in trauma centers and primary care settings. These guides help an individual or small planning team adapt alcohol SBI into their standard practice.

Risky alcohol use is a significant and costly public health problem that has not been addressed adequately despite the availability of effective interventions. Alcohol SBI works to reduce excessive alcohol use in persons who drink. Nurses can champion the routine implementation of alcohol SBI and deliver it effectively in a variety of settings, helping adult patients reduce excessive alcohol use and influencing clinical practice to effect population-level change. ★

Visit www.AmericanNurseToday.com/Archives.aspx for a list of selected references.

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