

Dealing with hidden drinking problems

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Remember

- Alcohol is a drug. It kills many more Australians than heroin does.
- A standard drink contains 10 grams of alcohol.
- The NHMRC recommended limits for safe drinking are up to four standard drinks a day for men and up to two for women, with two alcohol-free days each week. Above these limits is considered hazardous drinking.
- Over six drinks a day for a man and over four drinks a day for a woman is considered harmful.
- More damaging still is dependent drinking. Alcohol dependence is common, affecting 5% of Australian men and 2% of women. Many of these alcohol dependent people are superficially unremarkable.
- If it looks like a drinking problem and it smells like a drinking problem, then it is one.
- All clinical problems are hidden if you don't look for them.
- Dependence is not defined by amount consumed. The features of dependence are:
 - tolerance
 - withdrawal
 - loss of control
 - persistent desire
 - normal activities harmed by drinking
 - excessive time spent on drinking or recovering
 - continued drinking despite knowledge of harm.
- Shame and guilt are common accompaniments of alcohol dependence, as much a part of alcohol dependence as crying is of depression.
- The family live with the drinker. They provide an important source of information and support.
- Denial comes in many forms. Drinkers prefer to think of themselves and their drinking as 'normal'. Friends, family and workmates may collude with this fantasy.

Assessment

- Expect that all your patients drink (this is Australia), you are merely asking how much.

Table. Components of a brief intervention

- Giving feedback – explaining why you are raising the topic of alcohol
- Listening to the patient's responses without rancour
- Outlining benefits of reduced alcohol consumption
- Setting drinking goals (NHMRC limits)
- Setting strategies for reducing consumption (e.g. drink light alcohol, avoid 'heavy' parties, eat before drinking)
- Evaluating progress by review in a month

- Start with casual, open questions.
- Proceed towards the specific, aiming to find out the daily amount, when the first drink of the day is consumed and the consequences of drinking known to the patient.
- Use AUDIT, a 10-question, patient-completed questionnaire, to support your history-taking. (The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test questions are shown on the next page. A total score below 8 indicates nonhazardous drinking; 8 to 15 indicates hazardous or harmful drinking; above 15 indicates probable dependence.)
- Include questions about alcohol in the context of various health behaviours, such as diet, exercise and stress factors.
- Note that an otherwise unexplained elevated gammaglutamyl transferase (GGT) or mean corpuscular volume (MCV) may aid detection and promote motivation for patients when they recognise they have a problem.

Management

- Reduced alcohol consumption may be achieved by a brief intervention (see the Table). This is appropriate for both hazardous and harmful drinking, but NOT for dependence. Ten minutes of discussion and simple suggestions have been shown to have an effect 12 months later.
- Abstinence is indicated for all those with dependence and organ damage.
- Recommend Alcoholics Anonymous for all patients who can entertain the idea of stopping.
- Two medications – naltrexone (Revia) and acamprosate (Campral) – are now on the PBS to assist in the maintenance of abstinence.
- Detoxification, sometimes inpatient detoxification, will be required for some dependent patients. Diazepam should be ceased by the end of the first week.
- Despite the statistical association of alcohol problems and depression, prescribing antidepressants to actively drinking problem drinkers is not good practice. Most depressive symptoms resolve after detoxification.

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AUDIT alcohol use questionnaire

One unit of alcohol is: 1 schooner (425 mL) of light beer/lager
or 1 middy/pot of full-strength beer (285 mL)
or 1 small glass of wine (100 mL)
or 1 single measure of spirits (30 mL).

Select from the answers below and place the number that corresponds with your answer in the box.

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>1. How often do you have a drink containing alcohol? []</p> <p>0 Never</p> <p>1 Monthly or less</p> <p>2 2 to 4 times a month</p> <p>3 2 to 3 times a week</p> <p>4 4 or more times a week</p> | <p>6. How often during the last year have you needed a first drink in the morning to get yourself going after a heavy drinking session? []</p> <p>0 Never</p> <p>1 Less than monthly</p> <p>2 Monthly</p> <p>3 Weekly</p> <p>4 Daily or almost daily</p> |
| <p>2. How many units of alcohol do you drink on a typical day when you are drinking? []</p> <p>0 1 or 2</p> <p>1 3 or 4</p> <p>2 5 or 6</p> <p>3 7, 8 or 9</p> <p>4 10 or more</p> | <p>7. How often during the last year have you had a feeling of guilt or remorse after drinking? []</p> <p>0 Never</p> <p>1 Less than monthly</p> <p>2 Monthly</p> <p>3 Weekly</p> <p>4 Daily or almost daily</p> |
| <p>3. How often do you have six or more units of alcohol on one occasion? []</p> <p>0 Never</p> <p>1 Less than monthly</p> <p>2 Monthly</p> <p>3 Weekly</p> <p>4 Daily or almost daily</p> | <p>8. How often during the last year have you been unable to remember what happened the night before because you had been drinking? []</p> <p>0 Never</p> <p>1 Less than monthly</p> <p>2 Monthly</p> <p>3 Weekly</p> <p>4 Daily or almost daily</p> |
| <p>4. How often during the last year have you found that you were not able to stop drinking once you had started? []</p> <p>0 Never</p> <p>1 Less than monthly</p> <p>2 Monthly</p> <p>3 Weekly</p> <p>4 Daily or almost daily</p> | <p>9. Have you or someone else been injured as a result of your drinking? []</p> <p>0 No</p> <p>2 Yes, but not in the last year</p> <p>4 Yes, during the last year</p> |
| <p>5. How often during the last year have you failed to do what was normally expected from you because of drinking? []</p> <p>0 Never</p> <p>1 Less than monthly</p> <p>2 Monthly</p> <p>3 Weekly</p> <p>4 Daily or almost daily</p> | <p>10. Has a relative or friend or doctor or another health worker been concerned about your drinking or suggested you cut down? []</p> <p>0 No</p> <p>2 Yes, but not in the last year</p> <p>4 Yes, during the last year</p> |
| <p>Record the total of the 10 items here []</p> | |