

# Alcohol screening in primary care

Research has shown that a physician intervention with problem drinkers can lead to positive benefits for patients and society, and may lead to a decrease in medical costs for treatment in the first year.<sup>1</sup>

## At-risk alcohol use in adults

Twenty percent of men and 10 percent of women are at-risk, dependent, or addicted to alcohol based on the following rates of consumption:<sup>2</sup>

- More than 14 drinks per week for men
- More than 7 drinks per week for women
- Alcohol and concurrent prescription drug abuse and/or illicit drug use

## The CAGE substance abuse screening tool

Ask your patients these four questions to help identify substance abuse:

1. Have you ever felt that you should **C**ut down on your drinking?
2. Have people **A**nnoyed you by criticizing your drinking?
3. Have you ever felt **G**uilty about your drinking?
4. Have you ever had a drink first thing in the morning to steady your nerves or get rid of a hangover (an **E**ye-opener)?

If the answer to one or more of the CAGE questions is positive, consider these message points when talking to your patient:

### Step 1: Assessment and direct feedback

- I am concerned about how much you drink and how it is affecting your health.
- Less than 10 percent of patients drink as much as you do.
- You are drinking alcohol at a level that puts you at serious risk for a number of alcohol-related problems.

### Step 2: Negotiation and goal setting

- You need to reduce your drinking.
- What do you think about cutting down to one or two drinks, two to three times per week?
- Can you reduce your alcohol use for the next month?

### Step 3: Behavioral modification techniques

- Let's go over situations when people often lose control of their drinking, like sporting events and holidays, and discuss ways you may be able to avoid these situations.
- Can you identify a family member or a friend who can help you?
- What are the things you like about drinking?
- What are some of the things you don't like about your alcohol use?



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### What counts as one drink?

- 12-ounce beer or wine cooler
  - 5 ounces of wine
  - 1.5 ounces of distilled spirits
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## Step 4: Follow-up and reinforcement

- I would like you to return to the office in one month to see if you have been able to change your drinking.
- My nurse will call you in two weeks to check on your progress. If you are having any problems before then, please call my office.
- I think it would be beneficial for you to have follow-up treatment with a Behavioral Health provider.

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It only takes two questions to evaluate whether a child or adolescent is misusing alcohol.

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## At-risk alcohol use in children and adolescents

For young adults, a majority of pediatricians and family practice clinicians report providing some alcohol prevention services to adolescent patients; however, they do not universally or consistently screen and counsel for alcohol misuse.<sup>3</sup> Two screening questions can indicate risk by assessing friends' drinking behaviors as well as the patient's behavior.<sup>4, 5</sup> The order in which you ask the two questions depends on the age of the patient. The question about friends drinking is an early warning signal that strongly predicts the patient's future drinking levels.<sup>5</sup> It is also a nonthreatening approach to begin talking about alcohol with younger patients in particular. The question about the patient's drinking assesses the patient's usage.

**Elementary (ages 9 – 11) and middle school (ages 11 – 14) children:** Ask the patient about their friends' behavior first, followed by their behavior.

1. Do you have any friends who drank beer, wine, or any drink containing alcohol in the past year? **(Any drinking by friends heightens concern.)**
2. The next question focuses on individual consumption and is worded differently for each age group:
  - Elementary school: How about you – have you *ever* had more than a few sips of beer, wine, or any drink containing alcohol?
  - Middle school: How about you – in the **past year**, on *how many days* have you had more than a few sips of beer, wine, or any drink containing alcohol?

**High School (ages 14 – 18) children:** Ask the patient about their behavior first, followed by their friends' behavior.

1. In the **past year**, on *how many days* have you had more than a few sips of beer, wine, or any drink containing alcohol?
2. If your friends drink, *how many drinks* do they usually drink on an occasion? **(Binge drinking is three or more drinks and heightens concern.)**

### References

- 1 Fleming MF, Mundt MP, French MT et al (2000) Benefit-Cost Analysis of Brief Physician Advice With Problem Drinkers in Primary Care Settings. *Medical Care*. 38(1):7-18.
- 2 Fleming MF, Manwell, LF (1999) Brief physician advice for alcohol problems in older adults: a randomized community-based trial, *J Fam Pract*. 1999 May; 48(5):378-84.
- 3 Millstein SG, Marcell AV. Screening and counseling for adolescent alcohol use among primary care physicians in the United States. *Pediatrics*. 2003; 111(1):114-22.
- 4 Alcohol Screening and Brief Intervention for Youth: A Practitioners Guide. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism
- 5 Brown, S.A., Donovan, J. E., McGue, M.K., Shulenber, J.E., Zucker, R.A., & Goldman, M.A. (2010). Youth alcohol screening workgroup II: Determining optimal secondary screening questions. *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research* 34 (Supplment s2), 267A.



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