

Help comes in the mail for drinkers

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Mailing a simple information pamphlet to interested drinkers in the general population reduced binge drinking by 10 per cent, and is a promising public health approach to reduce the health and social problems associated with heavy drinking, shows a new study led by the University of Alberta.

Brief interventions to help people change their alcohol use have long been recognized as a potentially useful strategy, but past research in this area has focused on college students, problem drinkers screened in clinics and hospitals or people seeking specialized counselling and alcohol rehabilitation treatment.

“While these are important target groups, university students only represent a small fraction of drinkers in the general population who engage in heavy alcohol consumption and get into problems,” said Dr. Cameron Wild, lead author of the paper and a professor in the School of Public Health at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada. “As for screening for alcohol problems in health care, busy health care professionals often don’t enquire about alcohol problems. Our study was designed to fill this gap. We showed that simply mailing brief self-help materials to interested adults in the general public can be an effective way to expand the reach and impact of brief alcohol interventions.”

Results of the study were published recently in the journal *Addiction*.

The study, which was jointly conducted with the University of Toronto, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health and the Public Health

Agency of Canada, provided self-help materials to 877 male and female drinkers (average age 43) who were recruited from the general population. Alcohol pamphlets mailed to them asked respondents to compare their own drinking to the average male or female in the general Canadian population.

“Many heavy drinkers mistakenly believe that their behaviour is more common than it actually is,” Dr. Wild said. “By seeing how their alcohol use compares to actual population norms, this can motivate heavy drinkers to re-evaluate their use of alcohol.” A control group of 850 drinkers didn’t receive these materials until the end of the study.

All drinkers were contacted six months later to track changes in their alcohol use. The study results showed that drinkers who initially met a clinical screen for alcohol problems and who later received the brief intervention reported a 10 per cent reduction in binge drinking rates, compared to those who did not receive the pamphlets until the end of the study.

“It’s embarrassing to reveal to someone that you are concerned about your alcohol use, and drinking problems are highly stigmatized,” Dr. Wild said. “We know that most people prefer to change addictive behaviours on their own, and our research capitalizes on this by helping people take stock of their drinking habits.

Source: University of Alberta

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