

Smartphone app developed to manage drinking

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New Zealanders who want to self-manage their "hazardous" drinking may soon have a smartphone app to help them.

A new version of the popular American-designed [smartphone app](#), 'Step Away' can now be developed and tested to help adults here self-manage their [hazardous drinking](#).

University of Auckland Honorary Associate Professor Natalie Walker has received a feasibility grant from the Health Research Council of New Zealand (HRC) to determine if six months' access to a New Zealand Step Away app can reduce the frequency of [alcohol abuse](#) in a group of adult hazardous drinkers in Auckland.

Development of the Step Away app took four years and was funded by the US National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAA).

The app leads users through coping strategies, monitors how often they drink, identifies 'triggers', and gives weekly feedback reports tracking their progress in kicking bad habits.

The New Zealand researchers are collaborating with the US team to develop something that works here.

"To date, Step Away is the only publicly available and evidence-based [alcohol](#)- related [mobile app](#) grounded in sound psychological theory," says Dr Walker.

"But in its current form the app is unsuitable for New Zealand users as it incorporates North American drinking norms and safe drinking guidelines, numerous 'Americanisms', and links to US-based care services," she says.

"There are beneficial and cost-effective treatments for people who are [drinking](#) at hazardous levels, but few drinkers actually receive help," says Dr Walker.

"Mobile phone-based alcohol interventions have the potential to reach a larger number of individuals with alcohol problems and can support self-management of alcohol consumption," she says.

"As yet there hasn't been a definitive clinical trial of the effectiveness of the Step Away app, but with this HRC grant support we can now create a New Zealand version of this app and determine how feasible it is to test using a robust clinical trial design."

HRC Chief Executive Professor Kath McPherson says she welcomes steps to support people throughout this difficult change in behaviours, saying there's a huge cost to New Zealand society from alcohol abuse.

"Twenty per cent of deaths among 15 to 34-year-olds can be attributed to alcohol, mostly from road injuries, while the cost of alcohol-related harm in New Zealand is about \$5.3 billion a year or \$14.5 million a day, let alone the human costs to the people affected and their families," says Professor McPherson.

"This study is a smart and cost-effective way to leverage off the considerable research efforts of the NIAA in the US and adapt a New Zealand-specific app that can be fast-tracked to fill a treatment gap here, providing a widely distributed, first point of contact for individuals with an alcohol problem," she says.

Provided by University of Auckland

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