

Online tools help cut drinking in former soldiers

July 19 2017



Credit: Newcastle University

UK Armed Forces personnel moving back into civilian life and having difficulties with alcohol could be helped by the use of online tools, a new study has revealed.

The research led by Newcastle University, published in the Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps, shows that web-based programmes may be an effective way to tackle excess [alcohol consumption](#).

Findings by the experts have now been used to develop new documents funded by the Forces in Mind Trust to summarise the effectiveness of interventions to protect the wellbeing of those in the military.

Research has highlighted that two in three men in the UK Armed Forces are defined as drinking harmful amounts compared with just over one in three in the general population.

Online support

The study, led by Dr Sarah Wigham, Research Associate at Newcastle University's Institute of Neuroscience, reveals that online support worked especially when it involved personalised feedback.

It also found some effectiveness of electronic reminders prompting medical professionals to give advice.

Dr Wigham said: "This research could offer a lifeline to someone leaving the Armed Forces, or their family, as it shows that an online tool can help them cut back if they are concerned about their drinking.

"We know that if alcohol is used to help someone cope it may complicate the process of moving back to civilian life, for example, by exacerbating any mental health symptoms, or causing further issues such as difficulty sleeping or relationship problems.

"These quick internet tools were shown to be useful to people who may otherwise be reluctant to seek help as a way of reducing the amount of alcohol consumed."

An information sheet on the study's findings can be found at the Forces in Mind Trust website as the charity funded this research. Later this year, two further documents will be published summarising the overall

findings and interventions for wellbeing.

Unique pressures and demands

Brief interventions in the study included an individual recording online the amount of alcohol they had consumed recently, receiving personalised information on what this translates to in equivalent units of alcohol, calories, financial cost and other indicators which may be motivators to cut down.

It also includes information on mental health, pros and cons of drinking, setting goals and coping strategies for situations in which an individual may be tempted to drink more than usual.

Air Vice-Marshal Ray Lock, Chief Executive of the Forces in Mind Trust, said: "Most members of the Armed Forces transition into civilian life successfully, however, evidence indicates that a small number may have unhealthy levels of alcohol consumption. It can be difficult for these individuals to identify how to access support for their drinking, or even whether they have a problem.

"One of the Forces in Mind Trust's research priorities is alcohol and substance misuse, including effective and appropriate interventions.

"We would welcome further research to identify the positive impact these brief interventions could have specifically on the Armed Forces community to promote healthier transitions into civilian life."

Newcastle University's study showed that brief interventions can promote awareness of the health effects, and social or occupational effects of harmful levels of drinking.

Dr Wigham said: "The study findings and the new documents will be of

benefit to policy makers and service deliverers by helping to inform decisions on which interventions to fund and develop."

The online tools encourage people to drink in moderation rather than enforcing abstinence and can prompt them to think about the amount of alcohol they are consuming, increase awareness of any negative health and social effects, and may help them make different choices or change habits.

Interventions found to have an impact on moderating alcohol consumption included those delivered over the internet and using personalised feedback, and that had been developed specifically for Armed Forces personnel.

Coping with change

Data was collected from currently serving and former male members of the Armed Forces in the USA.

The study focused on military personnel moving back into civilian life as this can require simultaneous adjustments to job, housing, location, finances, relationships and family life. For some, these life changes coming together may increase their susceptibility to stress which in turn can lead to people drinking more than the healthy recommended levels of alcohol.

The researchers examined a number of online programmes including 'VetChange' and 'Drinker's Check-Up' and further information can be found on the Forces in Mind Trust website.

Dr Wigham said: "This study will benefit those moving back into civilian life by highlighting the effectiveness of some alcohol [brief interventions](#) including those delivered online. This will help service providers develop

and trial similar systems for the UK."

The study is a collaboration with Teesside University and Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust.

Dorothy Newbury-Birch, Professor of Alcohol and Public Health Research at Teesside University, is co-author of the study.

She said: "This is a really important piece of work which highlights, not only the levels of risky drinking former soldiers have, but also addresses ways in which we can help them to reduce their risky drinking.

"The research clearly shows that those leaving the Armed Forces are consuming higher levels of [alcohol](#) and more work needs to be done to support them in their transition into civilian life."

More information: Sarah Wigham et al. A systematic review of the effectiveness of alcohol brief interventions for the UK military personnel moving back to civilian life, *Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps* (2017). [DOI: 10.1136/jramc-2016-000712](https://doi.org/10.1136/jramc-2016-000712)

Provided by Newcastle University

Citation: Online tools help cut drinking in former soldiers (2017, July 19) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-07-online-tools-soldiers.html>

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