

Resolutions to cut drinking may be tough to keep

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(HealthDay)—New Year's resolutions to curb drinking are likely made

with the best intentions. But wishful thinking often isn't enough, a new survey suggests.

The survey, of nearly 3,000 "higher-risk" drinkers, found that roughly 20 percent wanted to cut back in the near future. But six months later, there were no signs that their motivations had turned into action.

On average, all of the study participants were [drinking](#) a little less at that point. But those who'd said they were motivated to cut back hadn't reduced their drinking any more than the others, the researchers found.

Experts said the findings are not necessarily surprising.

Many [people](#) say that when they've tried to cut down on drinking, they quickly revert to their "normal pattern," said Frank de Vocht, lead researcher on the study.

"Our study shows that this is, indeed, the case," said de Vocht, a senior lecturer at the University of Bristol, in the United Kingdom.

Linda Richter directs policy research and analysis at the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, in New York City. She agreed that motivation is often not enough on its own.

"Alcohol affects the brain and body in many ways," said Richter, who was not involved in the study. "And just being motivated to reduce your drinking—or even deciding to cut back—usually is not sufficient in the face of all the physiological, social and environmental cues that promote alcohol use."

Instead, she said, people typically need a specific plan of action. That can range from having the support of family and friends, to professional counseling.

The findings, from a survey of 2,928 U.K. adults, were reported Jan. 25 in the journal *Addiction*.

All were considered to be higher-risk drinkers as measured on a standard questionnaire. Their drinking habits ranged from "just above" what's considered a healthy limit, all the way up to possible alcohol dependence, according to de Vocht.

If people choose to drink, health guidelines generally advise that men should average no more than two drinks a day, while women should limit themselves to one a day.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, heavier drinking carries roughly \$250 billion in economic costs and kills about 88,000 Americans each year.

In the survey, around one in five drinkers said they wanted to cut down. Six months later, that group was drinking a little less on average—but so were the other survey respondents.

In fact, the "motivated" drinkers were still drinking more than their counterparts who hadn't expressed any intention to cut back.

It's impossible to know why, exactly, drinking levels dipped overall, Richter said.

"But," she said, "just participating in this study might have made people more aware of the extent of their own drinking."

How can you know whether you should cut down?

In the United States, Richter said, one definition of "at-risk" drinking is downing more than the one-to-two a day limit for women and men,

respectively. It's also defined as more than four drinks on any given day for men, and more than three for women.

Those people may or may not meet the criteria for diagnosing [alcohol dependence](#) or abuse, Richter said. And they may be able to try cutting down on their own before seeking professional help.

Richter pointed to some tactics suggested by the U.S. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. Among them: keep track of how much you drink; avoid people and places that encourage you to drink; find hobbies and new activities to replace some of the time you usually devote to drinking.

But, Richter said, "it's also important to note that there is no need to hit 'rock bottom' before seeking help from a trained medical professional or therapist for risky [alcohol](#) use or potential addiction."

Simply having a "willingness to change" might be sufficient for certain drinkers, de Vocht said. But, based on this [survey](#), it's typically not enough.

For those people, he said, it might be helpful to get a friend or family member to join them in changing their drinking habits. There are also smartphone apps that help people monitor their drinking, which could prove useful, he noted.

More information: Frank de Vocht, Ph.D., senior lecturer, epidemiology and public health research, University of Bristol, Bristol, U.K.; Linda Richter, Ph.D., director, policy research and analysis, National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, New York City; Jan. 25, 2018, *Addiction*, online.

The U.S. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism has an

overview on [treatment for drinking problems](#).

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