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New Tool for Physicians to Identify and Help Risky Drinkers

Helping Patients with Alcohol Problems: A Health Practitioner's Guide

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), in collaboration with the American Medical Association, is offering the Helping Patients with Alcohol Problems: A Health Practitioner's Guide. This user-friendly, research-based, comprehensive tool is designed to help primary care practitioners assist patients who are risky drinkers. A small pocket guide, complete with a standard drink chart, accompanies each 22-page brochure. The NIAAA is mailing the brochure and pocket guide this week to 40,000 primary care physician members of the AMA.

The set is also available free from the NIAAA, a component of the National Institutes of Health, at: <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/Practitioner/HelpingPatients.htm>

The AMA and the NIAAA recommend screening for alcohol problems and intervention for several reasons:

Patients need it. National survey data from NIAAA show that nearly a third of all adults engage in risky drinking, some only occasionally and others frequently.

It works. The screening tools in this Guide can help physicians identify the majority of patients who have drinking problems.

It's quick and easy to incorporate. Screening starts with two or three "How often? How much?" questions about drinking that fit naturally into physicians' regular health questions.

A growing body of research on alcohol screening and intervention has shown that primary care practitioners can promote significant reductions in drinking levels of problem drinkers who are not alcohol dependent.

An expert panel of primary care practitioners, clinical researchers, and a usability expert directed the Guide's development. In a two-stage evaluation, in-depth interviews with primary care practitioners shaped the publication to its final form.

Alcohol problems are common: Fourteen million American adults suffer from alcohol abuse or alcoholism. About a third of all adults engage in some kind of risky drinking behavior, ranging from occasional to daily heavy drinking. As a group, nearly one in four of these risky drinkers already meets the criteria for alcohol abuse or dependence.

"It is likely that in any given practice, a number of patients are at risk or already have undetected alcohol problems that can lead to injuries, illness, or disability," said NIAAA Director Ting-Kai Li, MD.

"Primary care practitioners can make a difference," said AMA Chair J. Edward Hill, MD, "by screening for alcohol problems and providing brief interventions or a treatment referral when needed. The process is quick and easy to incorporate into patient exams."

The core "how to" section of the Guide is presented in a graphic format, showing at a glance how to conduct efficient alcohol screenings, interventions, and referrals. The appendix includes the diagnostic criteria for alcohol abuse and dependence, an illustrated chart of standard drinks, and frequently asked questions, including: "What if a patient is not ready to change?" and "How can I help a patient who relapses?"

The Health Practitioner's Guide was distributed to primary care physicians in April 2003 during Alcohol Awareness Month, a national public awareness campaign to encourage local communities to focus on alcoholism and alcohol-related issues, with a primary emphasis on underage drinking and the devastating effects it can have on youth.

Alcohol Awareness Month is sponsored by the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence with the Leadership to Keep Children Alcohol Free as the Honorary Chair. As part of the month-long observance, substance abuse organizations across the country are encouraged to hold events in their local communities. For more information about Alcohol Awareness Month, visit the Web sites www.ncadd.org or www.alcoholfreechildren.org

On April 10, 2003 nearly 4,000 sites across the country will offer National Alcohol Screening Day, a free, anonymous screening for alcohol problems, information on the health consequences of at-risk drinking, the opportunity to discuss personal risk with a health professional, and, if appropriate, referral to a treatment program. To locate a nearby National Alcohol Screening Day site, call 1-800-405-9200 or visit www.NationalAlcoholScreeningDay.org

For anyone who wants to assess their own drinking, visit www.alcoholscreening.org

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