SBIRT IN PRIMARY CARE

Brief Interventions for Alcohol Use

mosaic GROUP

Brief Interventions for Adults

In primary care, most "positive screens" aren't for hard drugs—they're for patients who are drinking more than they should… and sometimes a lot more. So, what do you do when someone isn't ready to quit drinking but is still facing real health consequences?

This quick-reference tool helps you start insightful, productive, stigma-free conversations with patients on a journey to minimizing risks associated with alcohol.

Building trust through open, judgment-free discussions helps adults explore how alcohol use affects their overall well-being.

Conversation Prompts

- "Would it be ok if we talked for a minute about your alcohol use? I noticed you let the medical assistant know you were drinking about 3-4 times each week."
- "Drinking alcohol is so common. So I like to check in with my patients about their drinking habits. What does your current relationship with alcohol look like?"
- "A lot of people are surprised to hear what counts as 'moderate-risk drinking.' Drinking 2-3 times a week or having more than one each time can put someone in that category. My role is to help you look at how it fits into your overall health picture."
- "Many people don't realize how even moderate drinking can affect things like blood pressure or sleep. Have you noticed any potential impact on your health at all?"

Risks to Discuss

- Even moderate alcohol can increase the risk of several cancers, impair immune function, and increase susceptibility to illness.
- Alcohol is calorie-dense and can contribute to weight gain and metabolic issues.
- Regular alcohol use can raise blood pressure and increase cardiovascular risk.
- Any level of alcohol use can worsen anxiety, depression, and sleep over time.
- Any alcohol use can impair coordination, reaction time, and cognition.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS	HOW TO RESPOND
My friends drink a lot more than I do, so I don't have a problem.	I hear you. A lot of people compare themselves to others, but what matters most is how alcohol is affecting you—your health, mood, sleep, or relationships. A lot of people drink at levels that put their own health at risk, without realizing it.
I don't drink every day. You have to drink every day for it to be a problem.	Drinking every day isn't the only concern. Binge drinking or drinking despite negative consequences can also cause problems—even if it's not daily.
I've been drinking for X years, so there's no point in stopping now.	It's never too late to make a positive change and even small changes now can lead to real improvements. Research shows that people who cut back or stop drinking, even later in life, often see improvements in sleep, memory, blood pressure, and reduced risk of certain cancers.
Alcohol isn't a drug.	It might not seem like one, but alcohol is a drug—it affects your brain and body and has both short and long-term health impacts (see Risks).

Supporting Safer Choices

Including options for healthier choices in a brief intervention about alcohol use allows providers to meet patients where they are, especially those who may not be ready or willing to stop drinking. By offering practical guidance, providers can help minimize potential harm while maintaining a trusting, nonjudgmental relationship.

This approach encourages honest dialogue, supports informed decision-making, and prioritizes patient safety, even when abstinence isn't the goal.

MINIMIZING RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH ALCOHOL USE

- Avoid pushing abstinence or AA. Discuss cutting back/using less frequently or a smaller amount when quitting is not the goal of the patient.
- Recommend not drinking on an empty stomach and suggest alternating with a non-alcoholic beverage—water, soda, or a non-alcoholic 'beer'.
- Endorse using an app or calendar to track drinks over days/weeks.
- Discuss the risk of alcohol with any prescription medications the patient is prescribed or using.
- Caution the risk of driving or operating machinery while/after drinking.

Brief Interventions for Adolescents

When conducting brief interventions with adolescents about alcohol use, it's important to create a safe, supportive and nonjudgmental environment where they feel heard and respected. Focus on understanding the teen's perspective, exploring their motivations, and gently guiding them toward reflection and considering healthier choices rather than lecturing or warning. Brief interventions should emphasize autonomy—helping teens see that they are in control of their decisions—and should connect any risks associated with alcohol use to their personal goals, such as sports, academics, or relationships. If the adolescent is open to discussion, offer follow-up but let them set the pace. Even small expressions of readiness or curiosity are meaningful steps toward change.

With adolescents, focus on listening, supporting autonomy, and connecting choices about alcohol use to personal goals.

Conversation Prompts

- "A lot of teens are around alcohol at some point. Would it be okay if we talk a bit about how drinking can affect your health and goals?"
- "What have you noticed about alcohol use among your friends? How do you feel about it for yourself?"
- "Thanks for being open about your alcohol use. My role isn't to tell you what to do—it's to make sure you have good information and support. What do you think might help you handle situations where alcohol is around?"

Risks to Discuss

- Affects brain development, memory, and learning while the brain is still growing.
- Increases risk of anxiety, depression, and other mental health problems.
- Impairs judgment, coordination, and reaction time, making driving and other activities more dangerous.
- Can make it harder to concentrate and stay motivated toward personal, academic, or work goals.
- Increases risk of injury, alcohol poisoning, and unsafe decisions.