

Have Your Clinic Screen for and Intervene on Excessive Alcohol Use to

BUILD HEALTHIER NORTH CAROLINA COMMUNITIES

What is excessive alcohol use?

A standard alcoholic drink is 14 grams or 0.6 fluid ounces of pure alcohol. The alcohol content of different types of beer, wine, and liquor may vary. Typically, one standard drink consists of 12.0 ounces of beer at 5% alcohol by volume (ABV), 5.0 ounces of wine at 12% ABV, or 1.5 ounces of liquor at 40% ABV.

Excessive alcohol use includes **four types** of drinking:

- **Binge drinking:** Four or more drinks for women, five or more drinks for men during one occasion*
- **Heavy drinking:** Eight or more drinks for women, 15 or more drinks for men during a week*
- **Underage drinking:** Any alcohol use by people under the age of 21
- **Drinking while pregnant:** Any alcohol use during pregnancy

*Older adults who choose to drink may experience the effects of alcohol more quickly than they did when they were younger. This can put older adults at a higher risk for alcohol-related harms.¹

No amount of alcohol is safe for health. Each alcoholic beverage can increase the risk of alcohol-related harms. To reduce alcohol-related harms, national guidelines recommend that adults who are of legal drinking age choose not to drink alcohol, or to cut back on alcohol use. If adults of legal age choose to drink, drinking less is better for health than drinking more. Certain populations, such as those who are under the age of 21, pregnant, or planning to become pregnant, should not consume alcohol.²

What is the difference between excessive alcohol use and alcohol use disorder (AUD)?

Excessive alcohol use can have immediate and long-term health effects, but most people who excessively use alcohol do not have an AUD. Nine out of 10 people who excessively drink do not meet the criteria for AUD but still may benefit from professional help for their drinking behaviors.^{3,4}

AUD is a treatable, chronic disease in which someone continues to drink alcohol despite it causing substantial personal, social, work, or health problems.⁵ To learn more about treatment for alcohol use disorder, please see the [Build Healthier North Carolina Communities: Medications for AUD \(PDF\) factsheet](#).

What is screening, brief intervention, and referral to treatment (SBIRT)?

SBIRT is an evidence-supported approach to detect and intervene on excessive alcohol use in adults and to prevent progression to AUD.⁶

How does routine use of SBIRT benefit your adult patients and clients?

In 2024, approximately 1.2 million NC adults excessively used alcohol, which is about 1 in 7 adults.⁷ Excessive alcohol use can lead to immediate and long-term health risks. Drinking excessively on occasion can lead to motor vehicle crashes, homicides, violence, and other immediate injuries. Drinking alcohol over time can lead to cancer, high blood pressure, stroke, heart disease, AUD, and other chronic diseases.¹

In 2019, only 2 out of 5 NC adults were asked about their alcohol use and only 1 in 10 were advised by their providers about the risks of alcohol.⁷ Evidence suggests that brief behavioral interventions can reduce a patient's drinking by an average of 1.6 drinks per week and reduce the occurrence of excessive drinking by 40%.⁶ Since most people who excessively use alcohol do not seek treatment, clinicians incorporating SBIRT into their routine care can mitigate or prevent alcohol-related harms. Moreover, health payers including Medicare, will reimburse SBIRT.⁸

Who should receive SBIRT?

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommends that adults (i.e., those 18 years and older), including those who are pregnant, receive SBIRT. The guidelines provide no recommendation for conducting SBIRT in adolescents due to insufficient evidence.⁶

Screening

Structured, evidence-supported tools are more effective at identifying excessive alcohol use than unstructured patient interviews. Use of one- to three-item screening tools that can be administered verbally, on paper, or a computer provide good accuracy.⁶ Validated screeners like the [SASQ \(Single Alcohol Screening Question\)](#) and [AUDIT-C \(Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test – Consumption\)](#) can be used without licensing fees.^{9,10}

- **Positive Screen:** Consider further questions to assess typical drinking patterns and the presence of AUD through tools like the [Alcohol Symptom Checklist](#).

Consider helping to motivate patients to make healthy changes using motivational interviewing techniques like the Brief Negotiated Interview (BNI).¹⁰

- **Negative Screen:** Consider encouraging future healthy behaviors with techniques such as [REACT](#) (Reinforce, Educate, Anticipate Challenges of Tomorrow). A negative screen does not rule out alcohol use. There are opportunities with certain populations, such as those who are pregnant or trying to become pregnant, to educate about the risks associated with any alcohol use, such as fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASDs).⁶ For more information about FASDs, please visit [CDC's Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders \(FASDs\) Website](#).

Brief Counseling Intervention

These are opportunities to educate a person about their drinking and health risks from drinking, and help those who drink develop a plan to reduce their drinking. Interventions can range from 5 to 60 minutes and one to four sessions. A process for conducting a brief counseling intervention can include (1) raising the subject, (2) provide feedback, (3) enhance motivation, and (4) negotiate and advise.¹¹

Referral to Treatment

- **Referral to treatment:** The process of helping those at higher risk for excessive alcohol use and AUD receive more specialized care for diagnosis and treatment.⁶
- **Services to offer patients include¹¹**
 - Referral to addiction medicine physician for assessment and pharmacotherapy treatment
 - Individual or group outpatient counseling
 - Acute treatment services for those requiring medical intervention to manage withdrawal
 - Residential clinical stabilization services for those not or no longer requiring medical supervision
 - Peer-based mutual support groups

Tips to Help Adults Drink Less

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention offers tips to help improve health and well-being. These tips help adults make a plan to drink less alcohol. [You can share these tips with the patients you serve to encourage less drinking.](#)

Additional Resources

- Alcohol Screening and Brief Intervention: A Guide for Public Health Practitioners. Access at <https://integrationacademy.ahrq.gov/resources/11136>
- The Healthcare Professional's Core Resources on Alcohol: Knowledge, Impacts, and Strategies. Access at <https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/health-professionals-communities/core-resource-on-alcohol/recommend-evidence-based-treatment-know-options>
- For more data on excessive alcohol use and its related harms in NC, please visit the [NC Alcohol and Related Harms Data Dashboard](#).
- For general information and prevention strategies to reduce excessive alcohol use and its related harms, please visit the [North Carolina Alcohol and Related Harms Prevention Website](#).

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