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Brief Alcohol Counseling Improves Mental Health Functioning in Veterans with Alcohol Misuse

Veterans misusing or abusing alcohol is an important concern in VA, with evidence showing that nearly 1 in 5 Veterans presenting in primary care have problem alcohol use. Since 2004, VA has implemented universal screening for problem alcohol use as well as brief alcohol interventions (BAI) to help those identified as being problem users. BAIs consist of advice to abstain or reduce alcohol use to within safe drinking limits in addition to education about the potential harmful effects of alcohol on Veteran's health. Using data from a recent clinical trial examining the impact of BAIs on VA health outcomes, VA researchers reported that Veterans receiving provider advice plus a web-based BAI including counseling and a personalized feedback report—as compared to those receiving only advice to stop to problem drinking—showed significant improvements in drinking behavior as well as overall mental health functioning, depressive symptoms, and use of positive coping strategies. The researchers suggested that reducing a person's alcohol use may provide them with a chance to utilize more effective ways of managing stress, which in turn may improve mental health functioning.

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Did You Know?

- April is National Alcohol Awareness Month
- 79,000 deaths are annually attributed to excessive alcohol use
- Alcoholism is the 3rd leading lifestyle-related cause of death in the nation
- An estimated 18 million Americans have an alcohol use disorder
- Binge drinking is the most common form of excessive alcohol consumption and is defined as women consuming 4 or more drinks and men consuming 5 or more drinks during a single occasion
- Heavy drinking is defined as women consuming 8 or more drinks and men consuming 15 or more drinks per week.
- Most people who binge drink are not alcoholics
- Nearly one quarter of people age 18 and older report binge drinking on at least one occasion in one month's time
- Long-term excessive alcohol use can lead to health issues including neurological, cardiovascular, and liver problems
- Alcohol problems cost the US \$224 billion in 2006 from lost productivity, healthcare utilization, and property damage
- 1 in 8 troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan were referred for alcohol counseling



Sources: www.cdc.gov, www.ncadd.org, www.nih.gov/news/health/apr2014/niaaa-07.htm ◆

VA Initiative Shows Early Promise in Reducing Use of Opioids for Chronic Pain

The Department of Veterans Affairs has initiated a multi-faceted approach to reduce the use of opioids among America's Veterans that use VA healthcare. The Opioid Safety Initiative faces the challenge of opioid dependency with an innovative and comprehensive plan that closely monitors VA's dispensing practices system-wide and coordinates pain management to include patient and provider education, testing and tapering programs, and alternative therapies like acupuncture and behavior therapy. The VA has also developed patient management initiatives, a Veterans' Health Library, and resources for Pain Management for patients to use. All of these applications allow Veterans to better manage their pain without the use of opioids. To learn more about VA healthcare, visit www.va.gov.

Sources: <http://www.va.gov/opa/pressrel/pressrelease.cfm?id=2529> ◆

