

Screening and brief interventions for adolescent alcohol use disorders presenting through emergency departments: a research programme including two RCTs

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Plain English summary

SBIs for adolescent alcohol use disorders

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Plain English summary

Adolescents in the UK are among the heaviest-drinking adolescents in Europe. Drinking in adolescence is associated with alcohol-related harms, and early drinking is linked to intellectual impairment and more serious alcohol problems later on in life.

This research was conducted in three stages and targeted adolescents presenting to emergency departments to identify the size of the problem and develop and evaluate age-appropriate interventions.

First, we surveyed 5000 adolescents attending emergency departments, 40% of whom had drunk more than a sip of alcohol in their lifetime. Drinking earlier was linked to poorer health, and to alcohol and social problems. We found that a short questionnaire can identify adolescents who are drinking at risky levels.

Second, we reviewed published research and developed interventions. We met adolescents and parents to design the third stage of our research.

We then did two studies: (1) a study among adolescents drinking little who were aiming to delay starting drinking and (2) a study among adolescents drinking more who were aiming to reduce their consumption. Participants were allocated to one of three groups by chance: (1) screening only and care as usual, (2) feedback and brief alcohol advice, and (3) feedback and an application program with alcohol advice.

We successfully ran both studies and exceeded targets for recruitment and follow-up. However, we found that neither of our interventions was effective in reducing alcohol consumption in adolescents drinking high quantities of alcohol, or in delaying drinking in those drinking less or not drinking, compared with screening alone. Moreover, these interventions did not represent value for money compared with screening alone.

We later interviewed adolescents in the studies to explore their understanding and experience of taking part. Adolescents felt that they should know more about the risks of alcohol, that the advice was helpful and that emergency departments were a useful setting.

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