

# CDC: Docs aren't doing enough to discourage problem drinking

7 January 2014, by Dennis Thompson, Healthday Reporter



Only 1 in 6 adults says a doctor or health professional has discussed alcohol use with them, report finds.

(HealthDay)—Doctors aren't talking often enough with their patients about the harmful effects of alcohol, even if those patients are binge drinkers, U.S. health officials reported Tuesday.

Only one in six adults says a doctor or health professional has ever discussed alcohol use with them, even though [drinking](#) too much can be harmful to health, according to a U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report.

That lack of dialogue holds true even for binge drinkers. Only one in four binge drinkers reported discussing their drinking with a health professional. And among drinkers who binge 10 or more times a month, only one in three has had a serious talk with their doctor regarding alcohol use, the report said.

Only 17 percent of [pregnant women](#) said their doctor discussed alcohol use with them, even though drinking can harm the developing fetus, the CDC researchers added.

Such counseling can provide significant help to people who are problem drinkers, CDC director Dr.

Thomas Frieden said.

"Counseling for no more than 15 minutes can result in a substantial reduction in problem drinking," Frieden said during a Tuesday news conference. "It should be a part of routine patient care. In the same way we screen for [high blood pressure](#) and high cholesterol, we should be screening for excess alcohol use and treating patients appropriately."

At least 38 million American adults drink too much, even though most aren't alcoholics, he said.

"For every one person who is [an] alcoholic, there are six who are problem drinkers," Frieden said.

Frieden said problem drinking can involve:

- Binge drinking, or drinking too much on one occasion. Binge drinking is defined as five or more drinks within a few hours for a man, and four or more drinks for a woman.
- Excessive average weekly drinking. For men, that's 15 or more drinks, on average, a week, and eight or more drinks a week for women.
- Any drinking by pregnant women or people under age 21.

A drink is defined as 5 ounces of wine, 12 ounces of beer, or 1.5 ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits or liquor.

Problem drinking causes an estimated 88,000 deaths in the United States each year. It contributes to [health problems](#) such as heart disease, breast cancer, high blood pressure and sudden infant death syndrome. It also increases rates of motor vehicle crashes, violence, suicide and sexually transmitted diseases, according to the CDC.

"We are not saying people should not drink at all," Frieden said. "What we're saying is for people who

drink heavily there are serious health problems."

The CDC used patient survey data from 44 states and the District of Columbia to assess whether doctors are talking at all with those under their care about problem drinking.

The researchers found that despite increased understanding of the health risks of problem drinking, doctors are talking with patients about alcohol use about as often as they did back in 1997, the last time the CDC looked at this problem.

"The health-care system is not doing a good enough job," Frieden said.

These days, doctors and health professionals have access to screening forms that can provide patients with a quick idea of whether they're drinking too much, Frieden noted.

Such screening is also provided free of charge to patients under the Affordable Care Act as a preventive [health](#) service, he added.

Such frank talk with a doctor could reduce the amount of [alcohol](#) consumed by 25 percent among people who drink too much, the CDC suggests.

"Alcohol screening and brief counseling can help people set realistic goals for themselves and achieve those goals," Frieden said. "Health-care workers can provide this service to more patients and involve communities to help people avoid dangerous levels of drinking."

**More information:** For more on problem drinking, visit the [U.S. National Institutes of Health](#).

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APA citation: CDC: Docs aren't doing enough to discourage problem drinking (2014, January 7) retrieved 5 June 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-01-cdc-docs-arent-discourage-problem.html>

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