

An online Self-Help Portal Helps Reduce Alcohol Consumption

A new online self-help portal helps problem drinkers to reduce their alcohol consumption, claims a study by WHO e-health project on Alcohol and Health Investigators Group in their recent paper published in the international journal Addictive Behaviors.

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About 30% of the Indian population consumes alcohol, of which nearly 11% are moderate to heavy alcohol users. The harmful effects of alcohol claim 2.5 million deaths annually, as per a 2010 report by Global Information System on Alcohol and Health.

A new study claims to significantly reduce alcohol consumption by 44 to 58% in heavy alcohol drinkers. This study was done as a part of the WHO e-health project on Alcohol and Health. Investigators conducted an online pilot study to test if a web-based intervention reduces alcohol consumption effectively.

In December 2012, WHO in collaboration with research institutes and universities from Brazil, Mexico, Belarus, and Netherlands launched an Internet portal with a self-help program for people with alcohol addiction. The intervention was done in many countries by translating the webpage into the native language, and adjusted for cultural characteristics maintaining the same content and format.

In India, the webpage address is- **www.alcoholwebindia.in** that aims to provide a self-help intervention program to Indian alcohol drinkers. The intervention is based on three steps: principles of cognitive behavioral therapy, intervention, and motivational interviewing.

In the first step- the preparation for action phase; users register their alcohol consumption in the previous week, type of drinks, and context such as with whom, why, and their feelings before and after the drinks. The second step is goal setting, where the users determine their drinking goals for each day of the coming week, after which the computer program provides personalized feedback and suggests more reduction if the user is above low risk. In the third step, called the action phase, users complete entries for 6 weeks, perform cognitive exercises, and compare their drinking behavior with their goals, analyze progress, and take help and support others through discussion forums.

In order to take this self-help program, users access their level of alcohol related problem by completing a short screening test that scores between 0-12. A score above 4 for men and 3 for women suggests hazardous alcohol use. Then, they are invited to register and sign up by providing a username, password, email ID, and

non-mandatory information such as demography, gender, age, education, and work and how did they get to know about the program. They are redirected to read the privacy policies and requested to provide informed consent. They can review the intervention, time period, proposed activities, and other login requirements. If they are interested, they can enroll for the intervention program, after which they have to complete a detailed questionnaire, that helps categorize them into low risk, hazardous and dependent users.

The participants of the study did not receive any monetary incentives that increase the reliability of results as the authors claim, “We did not invite any person to participate, and none of the participants were paid or received any kind of incentive to participate”.

The study showed promising results but the dropout rates were high, approximately 76% did not complete the intervention after enrolment. The adherence to the intervention was 23% hence; the study is done with a small sample size. Despite its shortcomings, the web based self-help intervention showed about 58% reduction in alcohol consumption, and can help many problem alcohol drinkers who do not have access to health professionals, or live in remote communities. It will require low infrastructural costs and minimal manpower for management, therefore, could help millions of alcohol users and their families.

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