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Vital Signs

Awareness: Counseling by Phone Benefits Drinkers

By Eric Nagourney

Experience has shown that even a few short discussions with a health professional can help a problem drinker. But sometimes people who could benefit from the talks are unable to come in or reluctant to do so.

Maybe they do not have to, says a new study that found that counseling by telephone could be effective in curbing excessive drinking.

Writing in the August issue of *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*, researchers suggested such counseling could be good for hard-to-reach patients. It also uses fewer resources than face-to-face meetings.

“Telephone counseling for alcohol problems,” the authors write, “could help overcome barriers that often hinder access to conventional alcohol treatment such as stigma, transportation, child care and scheduling conflicts.”

The researchers, led by Dr. Richard L. Brown of the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health, screened patients in waiting rooms at 18 Wisconsin clinics and contacted those who appeared to have a possible alcohol problem. In all, the team worked with almost 900 people, half of whom were given just pamphlets and the remainder receiving counseling.

The program seemed to work better for men than for women. The men reported an overall decline in drinking of 17 percent, the women 11 percent.

The researchers said they were surprised at how readily many patients agreed to the counseling, which involved speaking up to six times with counselors.

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