

8 tips for having conversations about alcohol

1 Normalise the conversation about alcohol

Lead into a conversation by opening with “the next couple of questions we ask everyone” to normalise the conversation. Ask routinely, and link alcohol to your patient’s or client’s presentation or health concern.

Practise asking about alcohol when you’re already asking about smoking, healthy weight, or injuries.

2 Don’t force the conversation

Sometimes you can’t see alcohol harm unless you ask. As a healthcare worker, it’s your responsibility to ask your patients or clients about alcohol or at least plant the seed.

Some patients or clients may not want to talk about alcohol or are too intoxicated upon arrival. Provide resources to take home and ask them again next time they come in.

3 Be supportive, not critical

Drinking alcohol is complex and doesn’t make your patient or client a bad person.

You might drink, or not drink at all, but it is not hypocritical to have a conversation about alcohol with your patients or clients. These conversations aim to support your patients or clients to access help if they need it.

4 The ‘You, Them, Me’ approach

The You, Them, Me approach encourages your patient or client to consider how alcohol affects their lives in different ways, including the impacts of alcohol on themselves or others, and lets them know your concerns as a healthcare worker.

For more information on this approach see the Conversation Starter Cards resource in the [Having Conversations About Alcohol digital toolkit](#).

5 Managing time constraints

Early conversations about alcohol can plant the seed for bigger discussions in the future.

If time is short, provide resources like the [AOD Helpline](#) card, and the ‘[DrinkCheck](#)’ brochure to complete while they are in the waiting room, or to take home. Tell them you will follow up at the next appointment.

Free resources can be found at order.hpa.org.nz.

6 Explain what a ‘standard drink’ is

Remind your patients or clients that a standard drink contains 10g of pure alcohol; one 4% beer, 1 small glass of wine or a single shot of spirits. Your patient or client may be drinking more than they realise.

Knowing what a standard drink is will help you complete the Alcohol ABC Approach accurately. Find out more on alcohol.org.nz

7 Make referrals easier

Refer to the [Having Conversations About Alcohol digital toolkit](#) for a list of alcohol support services and other helpful tools and resources.

8 Insurance considerations

Asking about alcohol is critical to providing access to support if needed. Alcohol use is an important part of a patient’s or client’s clinical records. Unrecorded alcohol use can invalidate future insurance claims.

If your patient or client wants their alcohol use undisclosed, follow the usual process of advising insurers that there is undisclosed health information.