Seven Minutes of Counseling by ER Doctor Can Help Reduce Drinking

People who engage in hazardous and harmful drinking are more likely to reduce their consumption of alcohol for at least one year if they receive just seven minutes of counseling from an emergency room physician, a new study finds. Physician counseling can also reduce drinking and driving.

The study included 740 people considered hazardous and harmful drinkers, defined as men who had more than 14 drinks a week or more than four drinks at a time, and women who had more than seven drinks a week, or more than three at a time. They were divided into three groups. One group received brief counseling aimed at limiting alcohol consumption, the second group received the counseling plus a follow-up phone call, and the third received standard care alone.

The study reports that patients who received the counseling reduced their average number of drinks from almost 20 a week to 13 a week within six months. One year later, they drank slightly more than 14 drinks a week.

Participants who received the counseling reduced binge drinking episodes, from about seven per month to fewer than five, within six months. They engaged in slightly more than five episodes a month one year later. Among patients who received counseling, rates of driving after having more than three drinks dropped from 38 percent to 29 percent after one year.

Follow-up phone calls were found to have little benefit in reducing drinking.

The findings are published in the Annals of Emergency Medicine.