Clinical question
How effective are brief interventions in reducing alcohol consumption and improving outcomes for heavy alcohol users admitted to general hospital inpatient units? Heavy users were defined as those regularly consuming alcohol above the recommended safe weekly/daily amounts for the country in which the study took place.

Bottom line
Two studies indicated that alcohol consumption could be reduced at 1-year follow-up for people who received brief interventions as inpatients. A trend was observed towards consuming fewer grams of alcohol per week at 6 months in those receiving the brief intervention. No clear differences were observed between the brief intervention and control groups for self-report of alcohol consumption, laboratory markers (Gamma GT) or for the number of binges, driving offences or deaths.

Caveat
There was no consistency in baseline consumption levels for participant inclusion in the studies. The results of the studies were difficult to combine because of the different measures used to assess alcohol consumption and the substantial variation in how the studies were carried out. Screening alone may also have some impact on alcohol consumption levels.

Context
Brief interventions involve a time-limited intervention, focusing on changing behaviour. They range from a single session providing information and advice, to 1 to 3 sessions of motivational interviewing or skills-based counselling, involving feedback and discussion about responsibility and self-efficacy. Different health professionals may provide the intervention. A Cochrane review has indicated benefits from brief interventions in primary care.1

Cochrane Systematic Review

Further reference

PEARLS No. 360, October 2009, written by Brian R McAvoy

PEARLS are succinct summaries of Cochrane Systematic Reviews for primary care practitioners – developed by the Cochrane Primary Care Field, New Zealand Branch of the Australasian Cochrane Centre at the Department of General Practice and Primary Health Care, University of Auckland and funded by the New Zealand Guidelines Group. New Zealanders can access the Cochrane Library free via www.nzgg.org.nz

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