

Brief alcohol screening: special attention needed for psychiatric patients

Conclusion

When designing alcohol screening measures to be used all over health care organisations, special attention should be paid to psychiatric patients. Single item screeners proved to be much too insensitive in detecting hazardous drinking in this group.

Objective

To investigate the capacity of three brief screening methods to detect hazardous drinking in a psychiatric treatment-seeking population. The full 10-item AUDIT with cut-off points 6 for females and 8 for males was used as gold standard.

Methods

Data was collected from patients visiting a general psychiatry clinic. A questionnaire was administered to consecutive patients visiting seven outpatient units. The questionnaire included AUDIT and the hospital's standard alcohol screening question: a HED/Heavy Episodic Drinking/ single item screener based on the frequency of consuming 4 (females) / 5 (males) drinks or more in one occasion.

The full AUDIT and three screening measures were used for categorisation of hazardous/non-hazardous drinking. The screeners were AUDIT-C (the consumption items of AUDIT), AUDIT-3 (item no. 3 of AUDIT) and the hospital's HED screener.

Results

A total of 1811 patients (65% females) completed the questionnaire. The HED screener and the AUDIT-3 both showed an unacceptably low level of sensitivity. The AUDIT-C performed well for males, poorer for females. (Table 1).

Table 1. A comparison of screeners using total scores on the AUDIT as a reference standard.

Screener	Females (n=1176)		Males (n=635)	
	Sensitivity	Specificity	Sensitivity	Specificity
HED ^a	0.52	0.96	0.58	0.89
AUDIT-3 ^b	0.93	0.75	0.94	0.56
AUDIT-3 ^c	0.41	0.99	0.56	0.94
AUDIT-C ^d	0.95	0.72	0.75	0.88

Cut-off points: a) 2 for both sexes b) 1 for both sexes c) 2 for both sexes d) 3 for females, 5 for males



The HED screener failed to detect a large number of hazardous drinkers. Among the false negative patients were also heavy abusers and persons with signs of dependence. Twenty-two per cent of the false negative women and 11% of the false negative men were categorised with heavy abuse or dependence when using the full AUDIT (Fig 1).

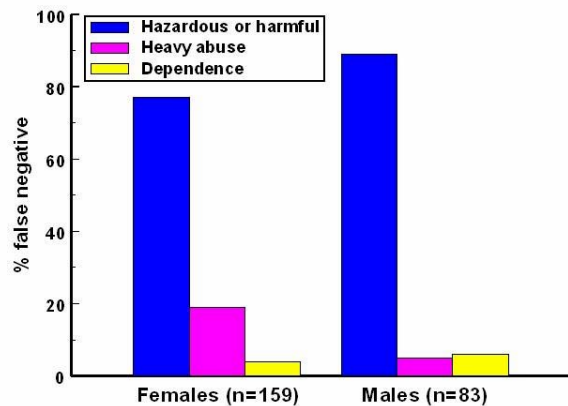


Figure 1. Level of alcohol use among patients falsely categorised negative using the HED screener.

Recommendation

The full 10-item AUDIT gives the most substantial information about the psychiatric patient's alcohol habits. The extra minutes taken to complete AUDIT may give valuable information for the planning of psychiatric treatment.