

GOD Bless America  
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## Validation of a Single-Question Alcohol Screening Test

*One short simple question effectively identified patients with unhealthy alcohol use.*

In busy primary care practices, time-consuming approaches to screening for unhealthy alcohol use are problematic. In this study — conducted in a primary care clinic at a Boston safety-net hospital — researchers attempted to validate the following single-question alcohol screening test that is recommended by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA): "How many times in the past year have you had X or more drinks in a day?" (X is 5 for men and 4 for women). A response of one time or more was considered positive for unhealthy alcohol use. After answering the single screening question, participants underwent standardized diagnostic interviews. The study population was 63% black, 17% white, and 16% Latino.

During standardized interviews, 31% of 286 participants were identified as unhealthy alcohol users (12% had current alcohol use disorders as defined by DSM-IV criteria, and 19% consumed risky amounts without having alcohol use disorders). Sensitivity and specificity of the single-question screen for unhealthy alcohol use were 82% and 79%, respectively.

**Comment:** In this study, performance of a single-question alcohol screening test was reasonable, and results were comparable to those of some multiple-question approaches. Validation of this screening question in primary care settings with different demographic characteristics would be worthwhile. The [NIAAA's Clinician's Guide](#) discusses the single-question screen and how to proceed when risky alcohol use is identified.

— [Allan S. Brett, MD](#)

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