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Cutting back the booze - The Pulse - Health Matters

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Cutting back the booze

By Peter Lavelle

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The typical image of the alcoholic is an old boozier on a park bench, swigging from a bottle of tawny port in a brown paper bag, ranting at the pigeons.

But 'boozers' actually represent a small percentage of people who have an alcohol problem. There's a much larger percentage of people who drink over the levels thought to be safe, but who hold down full-time jobs, have a home, and good social and family networks.

In fact, 'problem drinkers' - that is, people who drink more than the recommended limit of four drinks per day for men and two for women - outnumber 'alcoholics' by about four to one. They make up about 25 per cent of the population, says Associate Professor Sitharthan Thiagarajan, Director of the Australian Centre for Addiction Research at Westmead Hospital.

They're heavy social drinkers - who binge drink, or drink large amounts regularly, for whom alcohol is often part of a culture or a lifestyle.

Many of these people realise that they're drinking too much and would like to cut down, but can't find a way to do it, says Professor Thiagarajan.

Much of it has to do with the stigma of seeking help, he says. "They're turned off by the idea of having to stand up in a group in a treatment program and tell their life story," he says.

In other cases, it's because traditional alcohol treatment programs are usually abstinence based - the goal is to give up alcohol completely. That's the last thing they want to do - like 70 per cent of Australians, they do enjoy a tippie or two (or three!).

Others don't have access to treatment programs because they live too far away from a treatment centre - people in remote and rural Australia, for example.

But whether they know it or not, their high alcohol consumption is putting them at risk: of accidents, domestic violence, and serious illnesses like pancreatitis and liver disease.

Help is in the mail

But help is at hand - from a new service operating out of Westmead Hospital in Sydney, available to all Australians who feel they need help to curtail their drinking. It's a correspondence course designed to get a person's alcohol consumption down to safe levels, without necessarily giving up, says Professor Thiagarajan, a director of the program.

Anyone who's interested can ring a toll free number, answer a few questions, and they'll be sent an assessment package, which asks them to fill out details about their level of alcohol consumption and any medical problems they may have.

After that they get four more packages mailed out, one a fortnight, containing material aimed at helping them to assess how much they're drinking; how to reduce their intake; how to avoid risk situations (situations that will lead to drinking, for example); how to handle drinking urges; and what do about boredom and loneliness that might lead to drinking. The material is tailored as much as possible to that particular person, and each person gets feedback about how they're progressing, he says. After six months, they're assessed again.

Last year alone the Centre treated over 1000 people, making it the biggest alcohol treatment program in Australia in terms of numbers. Most of the participants are women and many are from rural and remote areas, he says.

Participation is free and confidential. It's funded by the New South Wales Health Department, but people from all states and territories can participate. Feedback indicates that 95 per cent of participants find it useful and would recommend it to others, says Professor Thiagarajan.

The number to call is 1800 006 577.

More info

- Alcohol - <http://www.abc.net.au/health/library/alcohol.htm>
- Alcohol guidelines - <http://www.alcoholguidelines.gov.au/groups.htm>
- Australian Centre for Addiction Research (ACAR) - <http://www.acar.net.au>

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