

*This is the third in a series of Ensuring Solutions to Alcohol Problems Issue Briefs addressing the effects of alcohol on work and family.*

## Alcohol Screening: A Quick First Step to Reduce Problem Drinking

With a modest investment, businesses, unions, schools and health care practitioners can implement a crucial first step to reduce problem drinking. A simple screening program can motivate some to cut back on their drinking. For others whose drinking is dangerous or disruptive on the job and destructive to families, it can open the door to treatment and recovery.

### Maine Reaps Rewards for Statewide Screening

In a survey, government employees in Maine's Department of Transportation reported that they were very concerned about the safety implications of alcohol and other drug use in their workplaces. To respond, the department's Health and Safety Committee and its Division of Human Resources facilitated the participation of the department's 2,500 employees in National Alcohol Screening Day in 2002. The state also offered families and retirees access to a confidential screening program year round. The state:

- distributed materials tailored to various sectors of its workforce and enabled supervisors to access these materials on its intranet.
- makes alcohol education a component of new employee orientation, new supervisor training and health and safety days.

The screening program cost Maine only \$5000. State officials, encouraged by growing participation in the screenings, are conducting a follow-up employee survey to gauge the low-cost program's effectiveness and plan to continue it.

People with alcoholism, risky drinkers and even casual drinkers who have hangovers can cause problems – and unnecessary costs – at work. For example, up to 40 percent of industrial fatalities and 47 percent of industrial injuries can be linked to alcohol use<sup>1</sup> and health care costs for employees who have alcohol problems are about twice as high as for the average employee.<sup>2</sup>

But people can learn if their drinking is risky in just five minutes by participating in a short structured interview or filling out a brief written questionnaire. What they learn can prompt them to diminish or curtail their drinking.

### Types of Screening

Two frequently used screening instruments are the four-question CAGE (see sidebar) and the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT).<sup>3</sup> Neither is considered a definitive diagnostic tool. Each, however, can signal the need for more detailed evaluation.

### In the Workplace

Confidential screening can be conducted in the workplace as part of:

- Employee Assistance Programs, which help with personal and work problems
- Company health fairs
- New staff orientations

### CAGE

- C**ut down on drinking.  
*(Have you ever felt you should cut down on your drinking?)*
- A**nnoyed by criticism about drinking habits
- G**uilty feelings about drinking
- E**ye opener drink needed in the morning

# Alcohol Screening: A Quick First Step to Reduce Problem Drinking

## In Healthcare Settings

Patients with alcohol-related problems are more likely to consult with doctors and nurses than with others for help.<sup>4</sup> So screening is particularly useful in:

- Physicians' offices
- Clinics
- Hospitals
- Behavioral health centers
- Emergency rooms

A study at one large hospital indicated that over two months, 24 percent of the adults who arrived by ambulance were people with alcoholism, as defined by their responses when screened.<sup>5</sup> However, given its effectiveness in identifying people with untreated alcohol problems, screening is underutilized. Physicians do not routinely screen their patients for alcohol use disorders,<sup>6</sup> but such screening is recommended "for all adult and adolescent patients" by the government-appointed U.S. Preventive Services Task Force, an independent panel of primary care and prevention experts.

Ensuring Solutions Issue Brief 4 will examine brief intervention, the valuable corollary to screening. For more information on the costs of problem drinking and what employers can do, see *Seven Tools to Lower the Business Costs of Alcohol Problems* available at [www.ensuringsolutions.org](http://www.ensuringsolutions.org)

## NATIONAL ALCOHOL SCREENING DAY: APRIL 10, 2003

Launched in 1999,<sup>7</sup> National Alcohol Screening Day is held each April to educate people about alcohol use, screen them for potential problems and refer those in need to treatment.<sup>8</sup> In 2002, nearly 90,000 people participated in free and confidential screening at more than 2,800 sites. For more information, visit [www.mentalhealthscreening.org/alcohol.htm](http://www.mentalhealthscreening.org/alcohol.htm).

<sup>1</sup> Bernstein, M. and Mahoney, J. 1989. Management Perspectives on Alcoholism: The Employer's Stake in Alcoholism Treatment. *Occupational Medicine*. Vol. 4, No. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Schneider Institute for Health Policy, Brandeis University. February 2001. *Substance Abuse, The Nation's Number One Health Problem*. Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Princeton, NJ.

<sup>3</sup> The AUDIT screen is available from the World Wide Web: <http://atwork.harvard.edu/fsap/assessment/alcohol.shtml>

<sup>4</sup> Hungerford, D.W. and Pollack, D.A. 2003. Emergency Department Services for Patients with Alcohol Problems: Research Directions. *Academic Emergency Medicine*. Vol. 10, No. 1: 79-84.

<sup>5</sup> Whiteman P. et. al. 2000. Alcoholism in the Emergency Department: An Epidemiologic Study. *Academic Emergency Medicine*. Vol. 7, No. 1: 14-20.

<sup>6</sup> Fleming, M. 1997. Strategies to Increase Alcohol Screening in Health Care Settings. *Alcohol Health and Research World*. Vol. 21, No. 4: 340-347.

<sup>7</sup> The founders were the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism and Screening for Mental Health, Inc.

<sup>8</sup> Biden, Senator Joseph. 2000. *Senator Biden Helps Launch National Alcohol Screening Day*. Press release. Available from the World Wide Web: <http://biden.senate.gov/~biden/press/release/00/04/2000A18808.html>

*Eve Raskin and Lynora Williams, March 2003*

2021 K St. NW  
Suite 800  
Washington, DC 20006  
Phone: 202.296.6922  
Fax: 202.296.0025  
[www.ensuringsolutions.org](http://www.ensuringsolutions.org)



*Working with policymakers, employers and concerned citizens, Ensuring Solutions to Alcohol Problems at The George Washington University Medical Center in Washington, DC, provides research-based information and tools to help curb the avoidable health care and other costs associated with alcohol use. The project works to improve access to treatment for Americans who need it. It is supported by a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts. For more information, please visit the Ensuring Solutions Website at [www.ensuringsolutions.org](http://www.ensuringsolutions.org).*