# High-tech solutions to screen drinkers

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A low-cost, convenient and anonymous method of asking Australians about their alcohol use has been successfully developed and trialled in New South Wales.

Developed by researchers from the University of Newcastle, the electronic screening and brief intervention (e-SBI) program has overcome many of the existing barriers to traditional brief interventions.

E-SBI is the delivery of screening and brief feedback interventions for alcohol use electronically via computer programs and the internet.

Traditionally in Australia health care screening and brief interventions have been conducted in person with health professionals, however time constraints on doctors, concerns about patient sensitivity to questions about alcohol consumption, and lack of knowledge and skills in administering brief interventions skills have often impeded their implementation.

Funded by a grant from the Foundation of Alcohol Research and Education (FARE), the study involved modifying an existing e-SBI program for evaluation in a large randomised control trial at the Ambulatory Care Centre (ACC) at the John Hunter Hospital in Newcastle.

There was a large uptake of the program with 63 per cent of those approached agreed to participate, and even those with limited computer competence found the e-SBI program easy to complete.

Of those who had consumed alcohol in the last 12 months, 40 per cent screened positive for hazardous or harmful drinking. The drinkers most at risk were young people and men, with 59 per cent of people aged 18 to 34 and 55 per cent of males scoring at a risky or hazardous level or above.

Dr Natalie Johnson, University of Newcastle, will present the findings of the pilot study at the Australasian Professional Society on Alcohol & other Drugs (APSAD) conference in Melbourne, and says e-SBI’s are a promising way of targeting individuals most at risk of harm.

“Specialist outpatient clinics in Australian public hospitals delivered almost 17 million outpatient services in 2009-10. As the prevalence of hazardous drinking is much higher among outpatients than in the general population, this trial represents an important first step in developing innovative and effective ways to reach and support those individuals,” Dr Johnson said.

As a result of its successful implementation, researchers have now received a National Health and Medical Research Centre Project Grant to conduct a large clinical trial of e-SBI.

FARE Policy and Research Manager, Caterina Giorgi congratulated the University of Newcastle on its pioneering work in this field.

“Alcohol use and misuse is the cause of substantial harms to the Australian community. The magnitude of the problem dictates that we must focus our efforts on evidence-based solutions but also that we innovate; that we embrace and harness technology where appropriate, to expand the reach and impact of such programs throughout Australia,” Ms Giorgi said.

[view the report](https://www.fare.org.au/electronic-alcohol-screening-and-brief-intervention-for-hospital-outpatients-a-pilot-study/)

### Metadata