

BACKGROUND

Alcohol Reality Check is a risky drinking screen based on Canada’s Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines. Sensitive to sex- and age-related factors, the screen looks at risk (a) to long-term health, (b) for immediate harms, and (c) of developing unhealthy habits of use including dependence. Three questions on the participant’s use of alcohol in the last week (if it was a typical week for them) serve to indicate levels of risk in each of these areas and cumulatively.



STEPS IN SCORING

- 1 Based on the sex indicated at the top of the screen, you will use either the “male” or “female” (body type) page from the scoring results sheet

Not all individuals taking the screen will wish to identify as either male or female. The research evidence clearly demonstrates different physical impacts of alcohol related to male and female body types. These relate to biological, not gender, differences. For those not declaring in the traditional categories, clinicians will need to confirm with them which of the two biological body types pertains best to their situation. Where there is unwillingness to identify with either of these types, the clinician can respectfully suggest they use the lower thresholds recommended for the female body type in order to minimize risk.

- 2 Based on the age indicated at the top of the screen, select the appropriate column on the scoring results sheet

The research evidence supporting the low-risk drinking guidelines distinguishes risk thresholds not only for male and female body types, but also in some respects for different age brackets (13-15, 16-18, 19-24, 25+).

- 3 Based on the total units of alcohol consumed in the past week (in response to screen Question 1), assess and indicate the level of risk to long-term health

You can do this by using a highlighter to mark the applicable box in the appropriate column and then highlighting the corresponding risk level in the first column.

- 4 Based on the detailed response section of Question 1 and the number indicated for Question 2, assess and indicate the level of risk for immediate harms

This is the most complicated step, but if you familiarize yourself with the scoring results sheet ahead of time and begin by checking to see if the participant’s responses break any of the conditions starting at low risk and moving up, you will find you can quickly assess the risk level. Use the highlighter as above to indicate risk level to the participant.

- 5 Based on the detailed response section of Question 1 and the number indicated for Question 3, assess and indicate the level of risk for developing unhealthy habitual use or dependence

If the participant’s responses break any of the conditions for low risk, their risk level is “increased risk.” Use the highlighter as above to indicate risk level to the participant.



6 Based on the scores in steps 3, 4 & 5, assess and indicate the participant's overall risk level

Use the highlighter as above to indicate risk level to the participant. Record the overall risk level on the bottom of the screening form and return it to the site planner. Provide the scoring results sheet with the highlights indicating the various levels of risk to the participant along with a copy of the Alcohol Reality Check resource card.

7 Discuss the results with the participant and seek to encourage them to reflect and plan appropriate action where needed

This conversation can unfold as you score each section, or you might share the fully completed scoring sheet with the participant and then briefly explain the results and explore any questions the participant may have. When a participant has done the screen online at a **beyond the blues** event and you have received a computer-generated results sheet, walking through the results with the participant and highlighting key points can facilitate a helpful conversation.

TIPS FOR THE DEBRIEF

You are there as a friendly helper. An approach that is empathic, non-judgmental and collaborative is more likely to inspire reflection, impart hope and incite a positive course of action. As the authors of *Motivational Interviewing* say, it “is a bit like sitting together on a sofa while the person pages through a life photo album. You ask questions sometimes, but mostly you listen because the story is the person’s own. Your purpose is to understand the life before you, to see the world through this person’s eyes rather than superimposing your own vision.”¹ Your role is to increase intentionality and confidence.

- Use open-ended questions that encourage the participant to think about issues and share those thoughts. For example, you might say
 - Do the results of the screening surprise you in any way, and how might you react to that?
 - So, how do you think this information might be useful to you?
- Be curious and engage in reflective listening that invites the participant to amplify (or correct) ideas put forward. For example, you might say
 - What can you tell me further about that?
 - How has that worked for you?
 - What steps do you see as most helpful and feasible for you?
- Encourage “change talk” that engages the participant in exploring the value and possibility of change. As people articulate ideas about changing, they become more likely to attempt changes.
 - If the participant has made even a passing reference to a desire to cut down, you might say, So you would feel more positive about things if you cut down.
 - Or if the participant has spoken of an over-reliance on alcohol, you could say, You seem concerned about relying too much on alcohol.
- Be attentive to possible connections with the participant’s results on other screens and help them explore those connections. For example you might say
 - As we discussed earlier, you’ve had some challenges with anxiety/depression. How do you see your substance use as related to your experience of being quite stressed/really worried/really down?
- Help the participant leave with a strong sense of their ability to manage their use and to draw on community support. For example, you might say
 - You can make changes in your drinking pattern. Your previous successes are solid grounds for confidence.
 - Family, friends and local professionals can all be an important part of a caring support network for you.

¹ Miller, W.R. & Rollnick, S. (2013). *Motivational Interviewing: Helping People Change* (3rd ed.). New York: Guilford.

