

## **Dry January**

Imagine what the UK would look like if we all took a month off alcohol next January. Imagine having fewer people in your waiting room or the local A & E department.

Well we're a long way off from this sort of scene but as Alcohol Concern launches its Dry January campaign for the second year, the charity has an ambitious target of getting at least 10,000 people to sign up to go dry with us for 31 days in January.

### ***About Dry January***

The aim is to start a new conversation about alcohol, to get people thinking and talking about their drinking and ultimately to inspire behaviour change following a positive and fun filled month of sobriety! This year more than 80% of people who we surveyed who were taking part in Dry January said they'd drink less during the rest of the year as a result of their experience.

To build on this we'll be conducting academic research with the help of Sussex University as part of next year's campaign. We'll track the impact of having a month off on people's drinking behaviours. We feel positive that we're going to see some good results over the next few years.

We are absolutely clear that this challenge is not a detox or for those with dependency issues and should never be promoted as such. It's aimed at the huge number of people who are steadily drinking a bit too much, too often. And there's plenty of us at it, 10,000,000 people in the UK are drinking over recommended guidelines and the health implications of this can be seen on almost every ward of every hospital up and down the country.

### ***Why occupational doctors should encourage their patients to give Dry January a go***

Doctors are on the front line, every day you see patients who are drinking at above recommended levels and whose visit may be alcohol related. We're not talking about 'alcoholics' here, we're talking about social drinkers. In fact up to 20% of patients presenting to general practice settings will be consuming alcohol at harmful or hazardous levels which means on average each GP will see 364 excessive drinkers a year that's 7 a week.<sup>1</sup>

Dry January can be a step in the right direction for these patients. Many of the people who took part with us last year told us they hadn't realised the bad habits they had picked up, that they were simply responding to all of the many triggers which can lead a person to picking up a drink without really thinking. Interestingly many people said they took part to prove to themselves that they could last the whole month. Most people were pleasantly surprised by how easy they found it.

Many of the patients coming to see you would benefit from Dry Jan and here's why:

- Cold and flu season – drinking won't aid recovery and can disturb sleep

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<sup>1</sup> Anderson, 1993

- Alcohol can negatively interact with medication
- Alcohol contributes to anxiety, low mood and depression and Dry January is a great opportunity to encourage patients to look at lifestyle issues that may be affecting their wellbeing
- New Year's resolutions – making a commitment and signing up to Dry January should help people to stick to their goal. We'll also be offering regular, online support
- Cutting out alcohol can help people towards any weight loss goals
- Over 10% of high blood pressure in men is alcohol related.

Dry January fits in with alcohol identification and brief advice (IBA): information acquired from the AUDIT screen can be used to suggest to patients that they could give the challenge a go. If you're using the FRAMES model for guidance for brief advice you can use this to encourage patients to give Dry January a go.<sup>2</sup>

You can also take an informal approach if you have a patient you think might benefit. So, if managers find it difficult to raise the subject of alcohol, Dry January is a great way of bringing up the topic in a gentle, non-threatening way. It's a universal campaign, not targeted and not an intervention so it doesn't look like you're singling anyone out. The way I like to put it is "if you think it'll be easy to give up alcohol for 31 days, then there's no reason not to. If you think it'll be hard, then it's probably a good idea to give it a try." Honesty: it really works!

### ***Doctors should lead by example***

You knew this was coming didn't you? It's not just your patients who will benefit from Dry January, you can too, and ideally you'll be leading the practice by example! We're already working with a number of medics who are backing the campaign. They've all signed up to take part as they want to lead the way in starting a new conversation about alcohol. So why not take the challenge at your place of work and get everyone involved. It will be easier to promote to others if you're doing it yourself.

And please consider fundraising for Alcohol Concern. We're a very small charity, 12 of us in all, with a huge job on our hands if we're to change the drinking culture of this country. We recommend raising money to keep you stay committed and show your patients that you're taking it seriously. Why not have a fundraising board at work where members of staff write a paragraph on why they're doing it, to spread the word; if you're digitally inclined tweet and blog about it; encourage patients to contribute and share their reasons for going dry.

This year we'll also be conducting academic research to assess the long term impact and benefits of having a month off alcohol. We think there will be plenty of positives for all sections of society from people going dry for a month.

So there you have it, we would warmly welcome your company for Dry January 2014 and please encourage your patients to do likewise. Sign up yourself, staff and patients at

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<sup>2</sup> [www.nice.org.uk/nicemedia/live/13001/48984/48984.pdf](http://www.nice.org.uk/nicemedia/live/13001/48984/48984.pdf) page 47 for information [accessed 25/10/13]

[www.dryjanuary.org.uk](http://www.dryjanuary.org.uk). Join in the conversation by following us on Twitter, @DryJanuary and liking us on Facebook.com/DryJanuary.

Here's to a happy New Year.