Following a review of the evidence against strict criteria, the UK NSC does not currently recommend introducing a national screening programme for alcohol misuse.

Alcohol misuse occurs when an individual drinks over the recommend units. Frequent alcohol misuse can increase the possibility of serious health conditions such as heart disease, stroke, liver disease and cancer. It can also affect employment, relationships and can cause anxiety and depression. GPs are being encouraged to provide support for people who are drinking harmful amounts of alcohol when they have concerns about someone’s health. This is different to a screening programme which would offer a test to everyone over a particular age (general population) whether or not they are drinking too much.

It has been suggested that offering screening will identify individuals who are drinking over the recommended limits. Early interventions can then be offered to help reduce their intake and risk of alcohol related harms.

Key findings supporting the UK NSC recommendation

The UK NSC looked at research on whether any tests were good enough to use for a whole population screening programme and whether screening improves health in the long term.

Population screening for alcohol misuse is not recommended because:

- the most common tests for alcohol misuse are questionnaires which are unsuitable when used within a whole population screening programme. This is because, when used in millions of people thousands would be wrongly told they needed follow on advice when they did not, potentially overwhelming services and reducing access for those who could benefit
- different people can safely drink different amounts of alcohol, depending on factors such as their age, sex and ethnicity. For a screening test to be reliable it will have to consider these factors by defining test ‘cut-off levels’. We didn’t find any agreement on what these levels should be in the diverse UK population
- the review did not find any research that showed a whole population screening programme would help to reduce the harms from alcohol misuse in the long term

The UK NSC regularly reviews its recommendations on screening for different conditions in the light of new research evidence becoming available.

To find out more about the UK NSC’s alcohol misuse recommendation, please visit:

legacy.screening.phe.org.uk/alcohol