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Drinking dilemma

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QUESTIONS about alcohol intake during consults may be unacceptable and morally challenging to patients, a GP says.

However, when asked at the right time and in the right setting, patients can be open to talking about their behaviours and receptive to brief interventions, Dr Michael Tam says.

Dr Tam, from the general practice unit at the University of NSW, will present his findings from a qualitative study on the issue at GP15.

Patients believe it is more appropriate for a GP to ask them about alcohol intake as part of an annual health check-up or when taking a medical history

than if their presenting complaint is a cough or cold, the study shows.

Language and tone are also important, it finds, and patients prefer 'caring and tactful' GPs.

A third factor in acceptability is the degree of 'challenge to moral identity' felt by the patient. Some report feeling ashamed or embarrassed at having to reveal how much they drink.

"There are situations where the patient doesn't see the relevance of the alcohol question and could potentially feel a bit offended if... it is not done sensitively," Dr Tam says.

Early detection of risky drinking is ideally conducted in primary care, the researchers say.

