

Use of text messaging (SMS) for alcohol treatment aftercare

Summary

Background: Relapses are highly prevalent within the first half year after treatment for alcohol use disorders. Therefore, aftercare and relapse prevention programs are required which could be integrated into routine care easily and also allow reaching patients who are not motivated or do not have the ability to participate in the available aftercare services. Mobile phone text messaging (SMS) is an interactive technology which allows recurrent brief assessments over a longer time period and the delivery of individualized short messages directly to the patients at any time and place. SMS aftercare programs could provide an alternative or add-on to the existing alcohol treatment aftercare services. In combination with expert system technology, SMS provides a suitable medium to monitor alcohol consumption within short time periods and to deliver individualized support.

Methods: In cooperation with the Centre for Alcohol Problems in Zurich (ZFA), an SMS program for relapse prevention after outpatient alcohol treatment will be developed. For a period of 6 months following outpatient treatment termination, the program provides (1) a biweekly monitoring of self-selected drinking goals via SMS, (2) motivational enhancement by supportive SMS feedbacks, and (3) proactive emergency aid by brief counselor phone calls in case of a relapse. We will investigate the feasibility and acceptance of this aftercare program in a sample of patients aiming for drinking abstinence or controlled drinking after outpatient treatment termination. The efficacy of the program will be tested in a controlled naturalistic study in which 200 patients are free to choose to either participate in the SMS aftercare program (intervention group) or not (control group). Adherence to the individual drinking goal and alcohol consumption present the main outcome criteria which will be assessed at 9-months-follow-up.

Significance of research: This is the first study implementing and evaluating an SMS program for relapse prevention after outpatient alcohol treatment. The results of this study provide initial evidence for the feasibility, acceptance, and effectiveness of this aftercare approach, which could be disseminated easily to inpatient and outpatient alcoholism treatment providers.

Key words: Alcoholism treatment, relapse prevention, aftercare, text messaging (SMS).