

Early Identification of Substance Misuse for Better Patient Management



Substance misuse is common among patients in primary care settings. Although it has a substantial health impact, practitioners report low levels of preparedness to identify and assist patients with substance use disorders.¹

When considering the management of substance use in general practice, practitioners should focus on legal drugs, such as alcohol and prescription medication, as well as illegal drugs like heroin.²

Screening for drug use (including tobacco, alcohol, illicit and nonmedical use of prescription drugs) has long-term health benefits.

Substance use (licit or illicit) has many adverse consequences

Multiple physical health, emotional and interpersonal problems are associated with illicit drug use. Cardiovascular disease, stroke, cancer, HIV/AIDS, anxiety, depression, sleep problems, as well as financial difficulties and legal, work, and family problems can all result from or be exacerbated by drug abuse.^{3,4}

Substance use disorders are highly prevalent among South Africans.

Estimates suggest that 13.3% of the population will suffer from a substance use disorder in their lifetime.² Alcohol is the most commonly abused substance in the country. South Africans are a nation of binge-drinkers. Up to a quarter of current drinkers engage in harmful alcohol use over weekends.⁵

Substance use occurs on a continuum, ranging from use to abuse to dependence. It is important for practitioners to correctly identify the level of substance use, as this will have implications for its management. When the misuse of a substance becomes a regular pattern in a person's life, he or she could be diagnosed with a substance use disorder.²

Screening for substance use

Screening should include questions that relate to the frequency, quantity, method (eg, smoking or injecting) and type of substances used. Patients may downplay their use. Therefore, it is important to clarify what is meant by "a bit", "socially" or "just a few drinks."

There are a number of screening tools that can assist with this process. The CAGE Questionnaire consists of four

questions that are used to screen for an alcohol use problem.⁶ These are as follows:

- Have you ever felt you should cut down on your drinking?
- Have people annoyed you by commenting on your drinking?
- Have you ever felt bad or guilty about your drinking?
- Have you ever had a drink first thing in the morning to steady your nerves or to dispel a hangover (an eye-opener)?

An affirmative response to two or more of the questions may indicate that the patient has an underlying alcohol use disorder and the practitioner should conduct a more comprehensive assessment of the patient's alcohol use.

The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) is a 10-item questionnaire that provides greater accuracy as to the degree of alcohol use⁷ while the Alcohol, Smoking and Substance Involvement Screening Test (ASSIST) is a useful tool in evaluating the possible misuse of both legal and illegal substances.⁸ Both the AUDIT and the ASSIST can be downloaded free of charge from the World Health Organisation's website (www.who.int).²

Management

Brief interventions can be very effective in halting a person's substance misuse, before it progresses to dependence.⁹

While brief interventions can be highly effective in patients with mild to moderate substance problems, they are not appropriate in patients who have been diagnosed with substance dependence.⁹ These patients require referral to specialist services, such as inpatient or intensive outpatient treatment.

Ideally, patients with dependence should be referred for treatment that includes group and individual therapy, skills training, cognitive-behavioural therapy, psychoeducational sessions, family involvement and relapse prevention.²

References available on request