



THE ABAM FOUNDATION NATIONAL CENTER FOR PHYSICIAN TRAINING IN ADDICTION MEDICINE

General Guidance for Substance Use Screening and Early Intervention in Medical Practice

Introduction and Background

Risky substance use and addiction constitute America's largest and most costly preventative health problem. Sixteen percent of the non-institutionalized U.S. population age 12 and over (40.3 million) meet medical criteria for addiction involving tobacco, alcohol, illicit and controlled prescriptions drugs. Another 32 percent (80.4 million) engages in substance use in ways that threaten health and safety. Untreated, these conditions drive more than 70 other conditions requiring medical attention, result in costly social consequences, cause at least 20 percent of all deaths and cost each person in America about \$1,500 each year.ⁱ

In more than 90 percent of cases, addiction begins with substance use in adolescence during the critical period of brain development.ⁱⁱ Like other health conditions, there are identifiable risk factors including genetics and family history, co-occurring mental health problems, a range of environmental factors and, of course, age of first use. Prevention is key and screening instruments have been developed to identify those at risk.ⁱ

Efficacy of Screening and Brief Interventions for Substance Use

Historically, addiction has been viewed in the context of individual types of drugs – nicotine, alcohol, illicit and prescription drugs – even though most of those with the disease are using more than one type of drug. Of those who are risky users but have not developed the disease, 30 percent are already engaged in current use of multiple substances.ⁱ Because of the historical focus on individual substances and the prevalence of alcohol use, much of the research about the efficacy of screening and brief interventions has been done with regard to alcohol use among adults. There is a much less robust research base related to screening and brief interventions for other substances and particularly for adolescent substance use. Research does show, however, that risky use and addiction are both preventable and that the greatest opportunity for prevention is with adolescents.

Guidance on Screening and Brief Interventions from NCPTAM

In order to prevent risky substance use and addiction and their costly health and social consequences, the American Board of Addiction Medicine Foundation, National Center for Physician Training in Addiction Medicine recommends as a general guidance that all physicians consider:

- Routine screening of adolescents and adults for risky substance use and addiction involving all addictive substances in the context of routine medical practice, both in primary and emergency care settings.



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- If risky use is detected, providing brief interventions designed to reduce such use, tailored to patient needs.
- If addiction is suspected, providing or arranging for a comprehensive assessment, diagnosis and treatment if needed, tailored to patient needs.
- Participating in research to document the most effective strategies for prevention and early intervention among adolescents and adults.

There are many resources available to assist physicians and their staffs; a summary of these resources can be found here: *Compendium of Resources for Identifying and Responding to Substance Use among Adolescents and Young Adults*.

Because these resources have been developed for different patient populations and are usually focused on individual drugs, we recommend tailoring them to:

- Include nicotine, alcohol, illicit and controlled prescription drugs,
- Recognize age and gender differences in the definitions of risky use,
- Tailor brief interventions to individual patient populations and needs.

For physicians looking for a place to start, consider:

- For adults, the NIDA Quick Screen:
<http://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/resource-guide-screening-drug-use-in-general-medical-settings/nida-quick-screen>
- For adolescents, “[SBIRT Overview for Pediatric Residents](#)”. Note, an easy registration is required to access the document.
- For more help: *Compendium of Resources for Identifying and Responding to Substance Use among Adolescents and Young Adults*

America will never treat its way out of the disease of addiction. We must develop new and more effective strategies for prevention, early identification and intervention for risky use before the disease sets in and before other health and social consequences occur. Failing to intervene until someone else funds and builds the research base condemns patients and their families to unnecessary pain and suffering and is simply not an option. For these reasons we recommend that physicians document their approaches and efficacy as they tailor their screening and interventions to their patient populations, and that they participate in building the research base needed to identify the most effective approaches going forward.

ⁱ The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (2012). *Addiction Medicine: Closing the gap between science and practice*. New York. Author.

ⁱⁱ The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University. *Adolescent Substance Use: America's #1 public health problem*. New York. Author.