SBIRT IN PRIMARY CARE

Brief Interventions for Illicit Substance Use

mosaic GROUP

Brief Interventions for Adults

In primary care settings, some positive screenings may uncover patients whose substance use poses risks to their health or safety—even if their use is infrequent. So, how can providers approach these discussions about illicit substance use while preserving trust and support?

This tool offers strategies for starting compassionate, stigma-free conversations with patients about minimizing harm related to illicit substance use. It's designed to help clinicians deliver practical, respectful interventions that encourage change and promote ongoing engagement in care.

Talking about how substance use affects sleep, mood, and goals supports whole-person care.

Conversation Prompts

- "Many people use substances for different reasons—stress, pain, sleep, or just to cope. Can you tell me a bit about what your use looks like?"
- "Many people notice changes in energy, sleep, or mood with substance use. Have you experienced anything like that?"
- "I'm noticing [mention medical or behavioral health symptom]. Sometimes that can be linked to substance use. Have you noticed any connection?"
- "Would it be okay if I shared a few ideas that have helped others cut back or stay safer?"

Risks to Discuss

- Cardiovascular complications (e.g., arrhythmias, heart attack, stroke)
- Respiratory issues (e.g., lung damage from smoking/inhalation, respiratory depression from opioids)
- Neurological damage (e.g., cognitive decline, memory problems, seizures)
- Gastrointestinal and liver issues, particularly with long-term stimulant or inhalant use
- Sleep disturbance, appetite changes, and malnutrition.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS	HOW TO RESPOND
I only use to manage stress/pain so it's not an issue for me.	It makes sense that you'd want relief—stress and pain can be really tough to manage. Substances help short term but often make things harder later. Can we explore safer options?
I don't use every day, so it's not "a problem."	It's good that you feel you have control over your use. Even occasional or binge use can also cause problems—even if it's not daily. Especially with today's drug supply being unpredictable.
It's a natural drug, it's safer.	That's a common belief. Some natural substances can still have strong effects on your heart, liver, or mental health, and because they're unregulated, doses and purity can vary a lot. Would you like to review what to look for to use more safely?
Quitting is pointless, I'll just relapse anyway.	It's understandable to feel discouraged—many people try several times before finding what works. Each attempt actually builds skills and insight. Would you like to talk about what helped you most the last time you tried to cut back?

Supporting Safer Choices

Incorporating healthier options into brief interventions about substance use enables providers to meet patients at their current stage of readiness. By offering realistic and supportive guidance, clinicians can help reduce potential risks while preserving a foundation of trust and understanding.

This approach fosters open communication, promotes informed choices, and keeps patient safety at the forefront—regardless of whether abstinence is the immediate objective.

MINIMIZING RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH SUBSTANCE USE

- Avoid pushing abstinence or NA if the patient isn't ready. Instead, explore cutting back—using less and less often.
- Recommend safer-use strategies, such as:
  - Not using alone
  - Starting with a small "test dose"
  - Avoid mixing substances
  - Use clean supplies
  - Staying fed and hydrated
- Discuss the risks related to the specific substance, including interactions with any prescribed medications.
- Encourage keeping Narcan available at home and on-hand, even if opioids are not typically used.

Brief Interventions for Adolescents

When talking with adolescents about substance use, create a safe, respectful space where they feel heard. Focus on their reasons for using—like stress, curiosity, or social pressure—and encourage reflection rather than debate.

Support their independence by reinforcing that choices are theirs and explore how substance use may affect what they care about most. If they are open, offer to continue the conversation and provide encouragement—small shifts in thinking can be meaningful progress.

Even a few minutes of supportive guidance can reduce risky substance use.

Conversation Prompts

- "Many teens experiment or try things for different reasons—what's been your experience?"
- "If you think about your life right now, how does using help—and how does it get in the way?"
- "Thanks for being open about your substance use. My role isn't to tell you what to do—it's to support you with good information. What do you think might help you handle situations where drugs are around?"

Risks to Discuss

- Early and frequent use increases risk of long-term dependence or mental health problems.
- Affects brain development, memory, judgment and learning while the brain is still growing.
- Increased risk of trying or unknowingly mixing other substances, which raises overdose risk.
- Increased risk of injury, accidents, and unsafe decisions.