

Pharmacotherapy for Substance Use Disorders



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KEYWORDS

• Substance use disorder • Varenicline • Naltrexone • Methadone • Buprenorphine

KEY POINTS

- There are several very effective pharmacotherapy options for patients with substance use disorders, although prescribers underuse these treatments.
- Combination nicotine replacement therapy (patch plus gum or lozenge) is the first-line treatment of tobacco use.
- Naltrexone is an effective option at reducing harmful drinking, but usually does not promote complete abstinence.
- There is strong evidence that opioid agonist therapy, either with methadone or buprenorphine, improves outcomes in multiple domains.

INTRODUCTION

Substance use can precipitate a broad array of illnesses. These disorders continue to carry significant stigma, both in society at large as well as within the medical community.¹ In the United States, 42 million adults, or 17.8% of the population, use tobacco products.² Alcohol use is even more prevalent, with 25% of US adults reporting binge alcohol consumption and 7% (nearly 17 million), diagnosed with alcohol use disorders.^{3,4} Although smaller proportions use other substances,⁵ these are often responsible for illness,^{6,7} increased health care use,⁸ more frequent interactions with the criminal justice system,⁹ and numerous other adverse outcomes.¹⁰

Screening

Primary care physicians are often the initial health care providers to encounter many patients with substance use problems and are well positioned to screen for, diagnose, and initiate treatment or referral for patients with addiction. Studies have shown that single-item screens have good sensitivity and specificity for detection of concerning substance use and are easy to implement in primary care settings (**Table 1**).¹¹

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Substance	Screening Questions	Positive Screen	Sensitivity (%)	Specificity (%)
Tobacco	In the past year have you used tobacco products?	Any	95	97
Alcohol	In the past year have you had 5 or more (4 or more for women) drinks in a day?	For men >5 drinks/d For women >4 drinks/d	82	79
Other substances	In the past year have you used illegal drugs or prescription drugs for nonmedical reasons?	Any	100	73.5

Diagnosis

With the publication of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Version 5 (DSM-5), the terminology and criteria for addictive disorders has been substantially clarified.¹² Confusing and vague semantics such as “abuse” and “dependence” have been replaced by the more universal “substance use disorder,” which is stratified into mild, moderate, and severe forms of disease (Table 2). Diagnostic criteria are fairly uniform across various drugs of abuse and include common-sense symptoms such as craving, tolerance, withdrawal, failure to fulfill social obligations, and use despite harms. Although use of specific DSM-5 criteria is often unnecessary in primary care settings, physicians should be familiar with the overarching principles in order to confidently identify and diagnose patients with addiction.

Treatment Principles

In considering pharmacotherapy for substance use disorders, it is important to determine the goals of the patient and the physician. Although complete abstinence from substance use is often the best option from a medical perspective, this may or may not be compatible with the patient’s goals. A frank, nonjudgmental discussion is important to ensure clear communication and maintain the therapeutic alliance.

Once the patient has agreed to address the substance use problem, treatment options should be discussed. Patients or providers might have strong feelings about the

Criteria	Severity
Using larger amounts than intended	0–1 criteria = no SUD 2–3 criteria = mild SUD 4–5 criteria = moderate SUD >5 criteria = severe SUD
Persistent desire to cut down or quit	
Significant time spent taking or obtaining substance	
Craving or urge to use substance	
Failure to fulfill obligations	
Continued use despite negative interpersonal consequences	
Reduced social or recreational activities	
Use in physically hazardous situations	
Use despite knowledge of harms	
Tolerance (excludes prescription medication)	
Withdrawal (excludes prescription medication)	

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