

THE ALCOHOL, SMOKING AND SUBSTANCE INVOLVEMENT SCREENING TEST (ASSIST) PROGRAM

WHAT IS THE ASSIST?

The Alcohol Smoking and Substance Involvement Screening Test (ASSIST), was developed by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and specialist researchers in response to the overwhelming global public health burden associated with problematic substance use.

The ASSIST was developed for use in primary health care settings where harmful substance use among clients may go undetected, or become worse. While many health care workers can identify dependence among clients, they may not be able to identify substance use that is harmful but not dependent. The ASSIST screens for all levels of problem or risky substance use. A risk score for each substance determines the type of intervention.

The ASSIST consists of eight questions, covering tobacco, alcohol, cannabis, cocaine, amphetamine-type stimulants (including ecstasy) inhalants, sedatives, hallucinogens, opiates and 'other drugs', that can usually be answered in under ten minutes. The scores are used to provide feedback to clients about their substance use as part of the Brief Intervention.

The ASSIST has been through several stages of investigation to ensure the instrument is robust and accurate. Phase I (1997-1999) investigated the feasibility and reliability of the ASSIST in 9 countries. In Phase II (2000-2002) the validity of the ASSIST was investigated in 7 countries (Australia, Brazil, India, Thailand, USA, UK, Zimbabwe). In Phase III (2004-2007) a Randomised Controlled Trial investigated the effectiveness of

the Brief Intervention for illicit drugs as linked to ASSIST scores. It was conducted in 4 countries (Australia, Brazil, India, and USA). Results demonstrated the 5-minute intervention linked to the ASSIST scores resulted in a significant decrease in substance use three months later. Our centre coordinated Phase II and Phase III for the WHO and is now funded by the Australian Government to promote uptake and use of the ASSIST.

WHY IS THIS NEEDED?

The harmful effects of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs are well known. The burden on the health care system from risky, albeit non-dependent use, is greater than the burden due to dependent use. Screening is a cost-effective way to identify people at risk from substance use which enables a tailored response based on their level of risk.

The ASSIST enables health care providers to identify clients who may be at risk from their substance use, and provide them with a targeted brief intervention accordingly. The ASSIST has been tested in a variety of different cultures and settings and has been shown to remain robust.

WHAT IS THE AIM OF THE ASSIST PROGRAM?

The overall aim of the ASSIST Program is to reduce harms related to substance use and provide a cost-effective interventions. We aim to achieve this in Primary Health and Welfare settings through the introduction and scaling up of the ASSIST linked to targeted interventions.

WHO IS THE TARGET AUDIENCE?

The target group are clients of primary health and welfare settings who are using substances in a way that may be harmful (but not necessarily dependent). Clinicians can also use the ASSIST to monitor ongoing progress of their clients and

provide feedback about the risks associated with their use.

HOW DOES THE SCREENING WORK?

The ASSIST can be linked to existing routine screening activities or when a client's presentation may be substance use related. It takes under 10 minutes to administer the ASSIST and 5 minutes to provide the targeted brief intervention. The instrument has been validated for both interviewer administration as well as self-completion.

The brief intervention is personalised and based on the clients ASSIST scores. Research has found most clients who receive the intervention report described it as useful and beneficial. There are also self-help resources that the client can take home to bolster the brief intervention.

WHO WILL USE IT?

The ASSIST and associated resources have been designed for staff in primary health and welfare settings. However, other settings that have contact with people at risk of the harms from alcohol and other drug use may also find the ASSIST useful. This includes settings such as emergency departments and antenatal clinics as well as those who work in the community with high risk groups such as youth, prisoners or indigenous persons.

RESOURCES

[The ASSIST Portal](#) is a one-stop shop that has all the ASSIST resources. This includes a self-directed eLearning course on how to administer the ASSIST and provide the structured intervention. The course is registered as a CPD activity.

The ASSIST Portal also contains a number of downloadable resources, as well as videos to watch how it's done. Several instructional manuals designed for Health Professionals in various

settings are also available. These include: ASSIST on Ice (designed to address methamphetamine use); ASSIST with Substance (designed for nurses in acute and primary healthcare settings); the Telephone and Video Consultation manual (designed for Health professionals conducting virtual consultations in the COVID-19 era). In Addition, the ASSIST has been translated in a number of languages.

A brief version of the ASSIST has also been developed for high turnover settings. The ASSIST-Lite is an ultra-rapid screening tool, ideal for time pressured areas such as emergency departments. The eASSIST and eASSIST-Lite (the electronic versions) are also available for online completion through the Portal. This reduces the time required to administer the instrument as well as scoring the results.

The ASSIST Checkup and ASSIST Checkup Lite are downloadable smartphone apps designed for self-completion. The apps also have a diary function to allow the user to monitor their alcohol and other drug consumption. Both apps are available on both iOS and Android platforms and can be accessed through the Portal.

[The ASSISTPlus website](#) has been developed for people who may be concerned about their own substance use, or the use by friends or relatives. It includes information about a range of substances, an opportunity to do a self-assessment and provides advice on how to cut down or stop using. There are also three videos on the site: how to complete the ASSIST, tips on how raise concerns with someone whom you think may have a problem, and testimonials from people with a lived experience.

MORE INFORMATION

For more information on ASSIST Brief Intervention workshops please contact: dassawhocentre@adelaide.edu.au