

Asking about substance use: when is it the right time?

It can be difficult to know when it's the right time to ask a patient about their use of alcohol or other drugs.

The following six examples represent an ideal opportunity to screen a patient for their substance use.

The patient is presenting to you for a preventive health consultation.

Preventive healthcare aims to identify and respond early to specific conditions, and to promote the maintenance of good, long-term health. One of the best ways people can prevent the onset and severity of conditions such as cancer, is to reduce their consumption of alcohol and other drugs.

Consider including an [ASSIST](#) assessment as part of your preventive health consultation. The ASSIST-Linked brief intervention is purpose-built to engage patients in a discussion about ways they can improve their long-term health by cutting down or stopping use.

You think substance use might be a plausible contributing factor to their presenting complaint.

Alcohol and other drugs are a leading cause of morbidity in Australia. Alcohol and other drug use will often lead to other issues which may not be immediately recognisable to the person.

If you think substance use might be a plausible contributing factor to the patient's presenting complaint, consider completing the [ASSIST](#) with your patient.

You are about to undertake a medication review for a patient.

Prescription medications can interact with other substances in dangerous ways. For example, there are serious risks associated with mixing alcohol or other drugs with psychiatric medications such as antidepressants or mood stabilisers.

Including an [ASSIST](#) assessment as part of a medication review may be a useful way to discuss some of these dangers with your patient.

You are conducting a Chronic Disease Assessment and Management Plan for the patient.

Alcohol and other drugs are a risk factor for a large number of chronic diseases, including many cancers.

When meeting with a patient to discuss Chronic Disease Assessment and Management plan, you should include an [ASSIST](#) as part of your consultation. An [ASSIST](#) assessment will help you and your patient identify any barriers to management of their chronic disease, as well as identify any other potential chronic diseases that the patient might be at-risk of developing in the future.

It is your first time seeing the patient.

Alcohol and other drug use is common in Australia. According to the National Drug Strategy Household Survey, as of 2020, four-in-five Australians drink regularly, One-in-nine continue to smoke daily, and 16% of reported the use of an illicit substance in 2019.

Normally, when you first see a patient, you might ask them whether they are a smoker or ex-smoker. Sometimes you may ask how frequently and at what quantity they typically drink. But there are better ways to find out information about a patient's global substance use. Consider screening for their alcohol, tobacco and other drug use using the [ASSIST](#).

You are conducting a Mental Health Assessment and Management Plan for the patient.

There is a greater awareness now about the association between alcohol and other drug use and mental health. Substance use both contributes to, and serves to maintain many mental health disorders. Alcohol and other drugs also interferes with the treatment of many mental health disorders.

When meeting with a patient to conduct a Mental Health Assessment, and to develop a Mental Health Management Care plan, you should include an [ASSIST](#) as part of your consultation. An [ASSIST](#) assessment in this context will help you and your patient identify any underlying reasons for continued use, and identify any barriers to treatment.

Why use the ASSIST over other screening tools?



It's comprehensive.

ASSIST screens for all drugs, legal and illegal – not just alcohol. That means you don't need different screening questionnaires when you want to screen for different substances; you have everything you need in one place.



It's quick.

If a patient says 'no' to using one or more of the drugs you ask them about, the relevant items are dropped automatically from the questionnaire – that means an ASSIST can be completed in as little as 3-5 minutes.



It's a useful health discussion tool.

The ASSIST is also connected to a purpose-built brief intervention, which can and should be used as the basis of health discussions for those at low- and moderate-risk use. The ASSIST comes with a feedback report card, which is an excellent vehicle for the purposes of driving an intervention.



It can serve as a referral.

For patients with high-risk use, the ASSIST can also serve as the basis of an active referral to a specialist treatment service.