



# VA/DoD CLINICAL PRACTICE GUIDELINE FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS

Department of Veterans Affairs

Department of Defense

## Patient Summary

### I. Substance Use Disorders

A substance use disorder is diagnosed when a person uses alcohol or another substance (marijuana, heroin, prescription opioids, cocaine, methamphetamines) in a way that disrupts or harms their life. A person with a substance use disorder may have cravings and urges to use addictive substances even though they have problems in their life when using these substances. These problems may include conflicts with family or friends, issues at work, or trouble with money. Treatment can help individuals stop or reduce their use of substances to improve the quality of their lives.

#### Did You Know?

- In 2019, about 20.4 million Americans met the criteria for a substance use disorder. Of those, 14.5 million had alcohol use disorder and 8.3 million had a drug use disorder.<sup>(1)</sup>
- Substance use disorders can be life-threatening conditions. At least 95,000 Americans die prematurely each year from alcohol use due to disease, accidents, and suicide.<sup>(2)</sup> In addition, in 2019, 49,860 Americans died of opioid overdose.<sup>(3)</sup>
- Patients may go back to using addicting substances, or have a lapse, even if they are following their treatment plan and seem to be managing their condition. This may mean that a change needs to be made in the treatment plan.<sup>(4)</sup>

### A. What Causes a Substance Use Disorder?

Addictive substances change the way the brain works, especially the parts of the brain that encourage activities that are important for survival such as eating, drinking water, and connecting with others. Normally, a person's brain allows him or her to remember the activities, people, places, and things that caused these pleasurable experiences. This allows a person to repeat important activities in the future.

The brain also associates pleasure with the use of addictive substances. With repeated substance use, a person values using the substance over doing more important things, even though the amount of the substance has to increase to achieve the same level of pleasurable effect. This need for more substance

to achieve the same effect is known as tolerance. A person with tolerance may feel like they need to keep using a substance to avoid withdrawal sickness. When a person continues to use a substance despite significant substance-related problems, he or she may have developed a substance use disorder.[\(5, 6\)](#)

## **B. How is a Substance Use Disorder Diagnosed?**

There are a few warning signs of a substance use disorder, such as using more of the substance or using it more often than you planned, spending lots of time using the substance or recovering from it, having a strong desire to use the substance, having difficulty managing your work or family obligations because of your substance use, and giving up other activities that you enjoyed because of time spent using substances. These are not all of the possible symptoms of a substance use disorder. Your healthcare provider can help you determine whether you have a substance use disorder.

## **II. Treatment**

### **A. What are Possible Goals of Substance Use Disorder Treatment?**

<b>Goals of Substance Use Disorder Treatment (7)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Stop or reduce the harmful use of addictive substances</li><li>■ Improve health and wellness</li><li>■ Strive to reach full potential</li><li>■ Improve quality of life</li></ul>

Your healthcare provider will work with you to define your goals and develop your individual treatment plan. The overall goals of treating your substance use disorder are to promote recovery and improve your quality of life.

### **B. What are the Treatment Options for Substance Use Disorder?**

There are multiple treatment options for substance use disorders that can help you reach your goals. No single treatment is right for everyone. By talking with your healthcare provider, you can learn more about the possible treatment options and decide which ones are best for you.

#### ***a. Treatment Setting***

Talking with your healthcare provider can help you pick the best treatment setting for you. You may be treated in primary care or a general mental health clinic. If you and your healthcare provider decide that you require specialty care, you may be referred to a specialty clinic for substance use disorders, where you will meet with healthcare providers who are experts in substance use disorders. Specialty clinics may also provide a range of treatment options.

#### ***b. Medication***

Medications help treat alcohol use disorder, tobacco use disorder, and opioid use disorder, but medications are not used for all substance use disorders. There are many medications for alcohol use disorder, tobacco use disorder, and opioid use disorder. You and your healthcare provider can work

together to select a medication that is right for you. Along with the medication, talk therapy may also help. There are many types of talk therapy or counseling. Talk therapy is described below.

### ***c. Talk Therapy***

Many different types of talk therapy help with substance-related problems. For example, talk therapy can help you see how substance use relates to other health conditions (as well as life challenges) and to decide whether it makes sense to reduce or stop your substance use. For patients who stop using harmful substances, talk therapy can teach skills to avoid a lapse. It can also help you get additional support and help teach your friends and family how to support your recovery.(8)

Talk therapy has been shown to reduce harmful substance use and improve health and quality of life. Each type of therapy is different. You and your healthcare provider can work together to select the therapy that will work best for you.

## **III. Questions to Ask Your Healthcare Provider**

### ***I drink/use drugs, but I am not sure if my substance use is a problem. How do I know if I have a substance use disorder?***

You can complete a survey that may provide some information on your degree of risk related to drinking patterns at this website: <http://rethinkingdrinking.niaaa.nih.gov/Default.aspx>. You can also see a healthcare provider who can help you determine if your substance use is a problem.

### ***Where, when, and how is a substance use disorder diagnosed?***

A healthcare provider will do an assessment and see if your substance use fits the description of a substance use disorder. A healthcare provider can do this in any treatment setting.

- You can find information on treatment programs at this website: <https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/>. You can also call 1 (800) 662-HELP (4357) or for a teletype device (TTY) call 1 (800) 487-4889.
- Veterans can find information on nearby VA treatment programs at this website: <https://www.va.gov/directory/guide/sud.asp>.
- Active Duty: For more information on substance use disorders, getting help, and treatments, each branch of the service will have a service-specific process for accessing substance use disorder treatment services. Check <https://tricare.mil/sud> for an overview of substance use disorder treatment or call 1 (877) 874-2272. For help right now, visit the Veterans Crisis Line for text support or call 1 (800) 273-8255 (Press 1).

### ***Is treatment for substance use disorder effective?***

Yes. Treatment for a substance use disorder takes time. Often people lapse back into substance use at some point during their treatment. However, people with a substance use disorder who receive treatment become healthy and stop or reduce their substance use more often than people who do not receive treatment.

***What if I have a lapse?***

As with other chronic diseases, symptoms may recur after being in remission. A person with a substance use disorder may experience increased cravings or go back to using addicting substances, even though he or she is following the treatment plan and seems to be managing the condition. At this point, it is important to work with your healthcare provider to reevaluate the treatment plan and consider other treatment options.

***What treatment is best for me?***

Treatment for a substance use disorder is not “one size fits all.” The treatment that is best for you depends on your substance use disorder, your characteristics, and your preferences. Talk with your healthcare provider about the right treatment for you.

***Where should I seek treatment?***

Talk to your healthcare provider about the right treatment setting. This may be in a specialty clinic for substance use disorders, a residential program, primary care, or general mental health care.

***I’m on Active Duty. How might seeking treatment affect my career?***

An Army Service Member can receive voluntary care without command notification if:

- the concern is with alcohol only and there are not any problems related to illegal or prescription drug use;
- there has not been an "alcohol use related incident" involving military or civilian law enforcement, Family Advocacy, or impacting behavior at work;
- the use of alcohol has not posed a risk to safety, security, occupational function, or the mission;
- the Service Member needs a prevention intervention or level one outpatient care only.

If the Service Member requires extensive or intensive treatment, then command will need to be notified. If the above conditions are not met, command will be notified, and this may or may not have career implications.

The Air Force, Navy, and Marines require that all episodes of treatment are reported to the command, but Service Members may self-refer for alcohol use disorders or prevention without risk of disciplinary action if there have not been any alcohol-related incidents.

Access and rules of voluntary care and substance use treatment are service-specific:

- Army AR 600-85
- Air Force AFI44-121
- Coast Guard COMDTINST M6320.5
- Navy OPNAV5350.4D
- Marine Corps 5300.17A

More information on the above resources can be found at this website:

<https://pdhealth.mil/news/blog/when-alcohol-use-becomes-alcohol-misuse-supporting-service-member-self-referral>.

***What if I am between assignments, on terminal leave, or unsure if I am eligible for VA care? Where do I get help?***

You can call inTransition and they will connect you with care 24 hours a day, 365 days a year:

- (800) 424-7877 inside the U.S.
- (800) 424-4685 outside the U.S. toll-free (DSN)
- (314) 387-4700 collect outside the U.S.
- Online at this website: <https://pdhealth.mil/resources/intransition>

***How long will I be in treatment?***

The length of treatment varies from person to person. The length of the treatment will depend on your treatment plan and your success in achieving your goals.

***How can programs like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Narcotics Anonymous (NA), and Self-Management and Recovery Training (SMART) Recovery help me?***

Active involvement in mutual-help programs like AA, NA, and SMART Recovery is valuable for many people as recovery support in addition to treatment. Many people in long-term recovery continue mutual help involvement after they complete treatment.

***Can I involve my family and friends in my treatment?***

Yes. Involving your partner, other family members, and friends in your treatment can help you stay motivated. You can have a stronger and more successful treatment experience with their help. If they are involved, you can also help improve communication and understanding about substance use disorders. However, your individual relationship with each of your family members and friends is unique. Discuss with your healthcare provider how each of your family members and friends should be involved based on his or her role in your life.

***I have other mental health or medical conditions in addition to a substance use disorder. What should I do?***

Discuss your other health conditions with your provider and develop a treatment plan that is right for you.

## IV. Resources for More Information

- Department of Veterans Affairs page on Treatment Programs for Substance Use Problems: <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/substance-use/treatment.asp>
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: <http://www.samhsa.gov/atod>  
Toll-free Number: 1 (877) SAMHSA-7 (1 [877] 726-4727)  
For a teletype device (TTY): 1 (800) 487-4889
- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism:  
Toll-free Number: 1 (800) 662-HELP (4357)  
For a teletype device (TTY): 1 (800) 487-4889
  - ◆ Rethinking Drinking: <http://rethinkingdrinking.niaaa.nih.gov/Default.aspx>
  - ◆ Treatment for Alcohol Problems: Finding and Getting Help: <http://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/Treatment/treatment.htm>
- Seeking Drug Abuse Treatment: Know What To Ask: <http://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/seeking-drug-abuse-treatment-know-what-to-ask/introduction>
- Alcoholics Anonymous: <http://www.aa.org/>
- Narcotics Anonymous: <https://www.na.org/>
- SMART Recovery: <http://www.smartrecovery.org/>

## V. References

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8. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Treatment programs for substance use problems: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs; 2015. Available from: <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/res-vatreatmentprograms.asp>.