

INFORMATION SHEET:

How Do I Ask About Alcohol and Other Drugs

Conducting a good patient interview is essentially about being open and non-judgmental, and enabling patients to express their concerns in a way that helps them identify the problems and take the next step towards addressing problems related to their drug use.

Display

- interest and attention
- empathy
- warmth
- active listening skills
- thoughtfulness (wisdom and knowledge)
- reflectiveness
- an inability to be shocked
- a non-judgmental stance that does not blur into collusion
- a style of questioning that enquires in an open, non-confrontational way about simple, recent issues

Be Vigilant

Indicators of Alcohol and Other Drugs (AOD) problems may include:

- domestic violence (actual or threatened)
- risks for children (e.g. neglect or intoxication-related harm)
- social isolation
- anxiety / depression
- stress management
- other drugs used to self-medicate

General practice and primary health care offer a variety of opportunities to enquire about alcohol and drug use. For example, in the context of:

- a new patient assessment - as part of initial information gathering
- management of chronic problems - alcohol for example, is a risk factor in cardiovascular disease, diabetes, depression
- management of acute problems, especially trauma, gastrointestinal disorders, anxiety / stress, psychological problems
- preoperative assessment
- pre-conception and antenatal care
- enhanced Primary Care Medicare Benefit Schedule items - health assessment, care plans and case conferences

Although Alcohol and Other Drugs (AOD) problems may be the primary presenting problem, they are more commonly detected when the patient presents for another issue.

INFORMATION SHEET:

How Do I Ask About Alcohol and Other Drugs

Just Ask

Low key, generic questions that are useful include:

- *'These days many people use alcohol or sometimes other drugs to relax, how about you?'* or
- *'Many of my patients drink alcohol, do you?'* or
- *'I'd like to ask a few questions about your general lifestyle.'*
- *Tell me about your diet?*
- *How much exercise do you get?*
- *Do you smoke?*
- *Drink alcohol?*
- *Take other drugs?*

If the patient answers 'yes' to any of these last questions probe further and seek specific information about quantities and frequencies. Do not settle for vague responses such as 'I'm a social drinker.'

Early Recognition of Alcohol-related Problems

More likely to be identified early when the health professional:

- is aware that psychosocial problems occur before most physical problems
- is willing to follow up with detailed enquiry and appropriate investigations

Assessment

Helps the doctor and patient, working together, to link high-risk AOD use to:

- past life experiences and expectations
- lifestyle, social and occupational factors
- physical and psychological conditions
- motivations for reducing / ceasing AOD use

Assessment is essential for formulating an individually tailored and negotiated treatment plan.

Some specific drug-related questions to consider include:

- *"When did you start using XXX?"*
- *"Have you stopped before and if so, for how long?"*
- *"What led you back to using?"*
- *"Have you had any treatment and what was the outcome?"*
- *"What do you like about using drugs?"*
- *"In what ways does drug use help you to cope?"*
- *"What concerns you about your drug use?"*