



A Call to Action

Because health care providers are charged with the important responsibility of safeguarding the health and well-being of adolescents and their families, they can play a pivotal role in recognizing and getting care for young patients who develop an alcohol-related or drug-related health or behavioral problem. Identifying and getting help for these young people is important for many reasons.

- ▶ Substance abuse puts millions of adolescents at risk for serious consequences such as alcohol-related and drug-related traffic accidents and other unintentional injuries; delinquent and criminal behavior; mental health problems; and sexual practices that place them at increased risk for unplanned pregnancies as well as HIV/AIDS, hepatitis C, and other sexually transmitted diseases.¹
- ▶ In 1998, nearly 10 percent of adolescents (age 12 to 17) reported using an illicit drug at least once during the past month. About 1 in 12 young people (8.3 percent) in this age group were current users of marijuana at that time.²
- ▶ An estimated 10.5 million current drinkers are age 12 to 20. Of this group, 5.1 million engage in binge drinking, including 2.3 million who would also be classified as heavy drinkers.²
- ▶ In 1998, an estimated 59,086 emergency department drug episodes occurred among adolescents age 12 to 17. Marijuana/hashish was involved in an estimated 13,135 of these episodes, and cocaine was involved in an estimated 4,309.³
- ▶ Although addictions to alcohol and illicit drugs are disorders commonly seen in medical practice, the problem is poorly diagnosed by physicians.⁴ In one study, 45 percent of patients presenting for addiction treatment reported that the physician who cared for them was unaware of their substance abuse problem.⁵
- ▶ In a 1996 survey, only 46 percent of the responding pediatricians in direct patient care reported diagnosing a patient with a substance abuse problem in the past year. The largest number of diagnosed substance abuse cases was among youth age 15 to 16, and alcohol was the most frequently abused substance among adolescents.⁶



Getting Involved—Next Steps

Health care providers—such as pediatricians, psychologists, social workers, school nurses and counselors, and emergency room physicians—can help adolescents get the help they need by establishing rapport with their patients, creating opportunities to discuss the use of alcohol and illicit drugs, and recognizing and acting on the signs of substance abuse. Here are some steps that health care providers, especially those engaged in direct patient care, can take to help adolescents deal with substance abuse problems.

➤ *Screening*

Screen adolescents for substance abuse every time they seek medical treatment, particularly if they come from a family with a history of alcohol or drug addiction or present with substantial behavioral changes, emergency medical services for trauma, or sudden medical problems such as accidents, injury, or gastrointestinal disturbance.^{1,7}

Use a structured or semistructured screening interview that focuses on substance abuse severity and a core group of associated factors such as legal problems, mental health status, educational functioning, and living situation. Select screening instruments based on their reliability and validity specifically for adolescent populations in a particular type of treatment setting.¹

Screen adolescents for a family history of addiction. Be sure to communicate the increased risks for addiction and related problems to youth with a family history of substance abuse.⁸

Support the establishment of standardized screening and assessment tools for use by everyone who works with young people in your community.¹

➤ *Assessment*

Conduct or provide a referral to a comprehensive assessment for all adolescents whose screening reveals indicators (e.g., daily use of one or more substances) of serious substance abuse problems.¹

Use an assessment instrument with established reliability and validity that was developed specifically for young people.¹