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Substance Abuse Disorders in Adolescents: Screening and Engagement in Primary Care Settings

Developers: Drexel University College of Medicine and Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania

Curriculum resource type: Didactic

Method used: Web-based videos and instructional text

Intended audience: Medical students (years 1-4), residents in primary care specialties, and practicing physicians in primary care specialties

Implementation time: 1.5-2 hours

Additional components: References; NIDA treatment guidelines

Educational objectives:

- Understand the risk and protective factors for substance use disorders in adolescents
- Learn the skills necessary to conduct a primary inquiry about substance use, including taking a substance use history with adolescent patients
- Recognize substance abuse and addiction in adolescent patients
- Demonstrate how to engage adolescent patients in preventive strategies and treatment for substance abuse or addiction

Evaluation tools: Behavior skills checklist and learner assessment questions

Curriculum resource description: Adolescence is a time of significant physical, psychological, social, emotional, and intellectual development. In addition, the brain development occurring during this period makes it more difficult for adolescents to control their impulses and plan for the future. This heightened impulsivity increases their willingness to engage in risk-taking behaviors, such as drug use. Drug and alcohol use during adolescence can increase risk for developing problems with attention, learning, and working memory, as well as increase the risk for future problems with substance abuse and addiction. Research shows that most teens do not use drugs, but drug use does occur frequently among adolescents and is often identified among teens who are experiencing interpersonal and family conflicts, school difficulty or failure, criminal activity, or some psychiatric disorders. Although the majority of teens who use drugs do not become addicted, even limited substance use can have a significant impact on a teen’s relationship with family, peers, school, and community. Physicians can master communication skills that help elicit accurate information to identify and assess teens at risk for drug use and addiction. This educational module about the clinical assessment of substance abuse disorders in adolescents presents written text and instructional videos that provide the knowledge and skills needed in the screening, evaluation, and referral to treatment of adolescents with substance use disorders. In addition, the module is designed to help physicians and other health care practitioners address stigma about providing clinical care to adolescents with substance use disorders.

Key words: adolescent; drug abuse; drug addiction; substance abuse; risk factors; prevention

