

Original Research

An update on substance abuse screen in adolescents/newer screening

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Abstract

Substance abuse screening in adolescents is a critical public health initiative aimed at early detection, intervention, and support for individuals at risk of drug and alcohol misuse. This comprehensive review explores the evolution of screening methodologies, types of screening tests, challenges, benefits of early detection, importance of confidentiality, and the pivotal role of parents and guardians in supporting adolescents' well-being. Advances in technology, such as biomarker analysis, genetic testing, digital health technologies, and telehealth, offer promising alternatives to traditional screening methods, enhancing accuracy, accessibility, and effectiveness. Despite the challenges posed by social stigma, privacy concerns, and developmental factors, early detection facilitates prevention of long-term health issues, personalized intervention planning, and reduction in societal costs. Confidentiality serves as a cornerstone in fostering trust, promoting open communication, and safeguarding adolescents' privacy rights, while parents and guardians play a crucial role in recognizing signs of substance abuse, fostering open communication, and seeking professional help. By embracing innovation, collaboration, and empowerment, stakeholders can optimize the efficacy and impact of substance abuse screening initiatives, ultimately promoting resilience, recovery, and well-being among adolescents.

Keywords: Substance abuse screening, adolescents, early detection, confidentiality, parental role, innovation.

Introduction to Substance Abuse Screening in Adolescents

Substance abuse screening stands as an indispensable tool in the realm of adolescent healthcare, focusing on the identification and early intervention of drug and alcohol misuse. Adolescence, marked by rapid physical, emotional, and cognitive development, is a pivotal period where individuals are particularly susceptible to the allure of experimentation with substances. The ramifications of early substance abuse can be profound, ranging from impaired cognitive functions and academic performance to long-term health complications and increased susceptibility to addiction in adulthood [1-5].

The primary objective of substance abuse screening in adolescents is twofold: to detect the presence of illicit substances and to facilitate timely intervention and support. By identifying at-risk individuals in the nascent stages of substance use, healthcare professionals can devise tailored interventions, ranging from counseling and educational programs to pharmacological treatments, to mitigate the adverse effects of substance abuse and promote healthier lifestyles [1-5].

Moreover, substance abuse screening serves as a proactive approach to safeguarding the well-being of adolescents, equipping them with the knowledge and resources to make informed decisions regarding substance use. It also plays a pivotal role in fostering a supportive environment where open dialogue about the risks and consequences of substance abuse is encouraged, enabling adolescents to seek assistance without fear of judgment or reprisal [1-5].

In recent years, the landscape of substance abuse screening has undergone significant evolution, driven by advancements in medical technology, research, and policy frameworks. Innovative screening methods, such as biomarker analysis and genetic testing, have augmented traditional approaches, enhancing the accuracy, reliability, and efficiency of detection methods. Furthermore, the integration of digital health technologies, telehealth services, and data analytics has revolutionized the delivery of screening services, making them more accessible, personalized, and responsive to the unique needs and preferences of adolescents.

Evolution of Substance Abuse Screening

The journey of substance abuse screening spans several decades, reflecting the dynamic interplay between scientific advancements, societal attitudes, and healthcare policies. The evolution of screening methodologies is

a testament to our growing understanding of substance abuse as a multifaceted health issue, necessitating nuanced and adaptable approaches to detection and intervention [4-8].

Historical Background

Historically, substance abuse screening predominantly relied on behavioral observations, self-reporting, and rudimentary testing methods. Early screening initiatives were often reactive in nature, responding to visible signs of intoxication or behavioral changes rather than proactively identifying individuals at risk of substance misuse. These rudimentary approaches, while well-intentioned, were frequently limited by their subjectivity, lack of specificity, and susceptibility to biases and misinterpretations [4-8].

Modern Approaches and Advancements

The landscape of substance abuse screening underwent a paradigm shift with the advent of modern medical technology, research methodologies, and evidence-based practices. Contemporary screening methods leverage a diverse array of techniques and tools to detect the presence of illicit substances accurately and reliably, catering to the unique physiological and psychological characteristics of adolescents [5-10].

- **Urine tests:** One of the most widely adopted screening methods, urine tests offer a non-invasive and cost-effective means of detecting recent drug use. Advances in analytical chemistry and diagnostic technology have enhanced the sensitivity and specificity of urine tests, enabling the detection of a broader range of substances with greater accuracy and precision.
- **Blood tests:** Blood tests provide a comprehensive analysis of substance levels in the bloodstream, offering valuable insights into the metabolic processes and physiological effects of substance abuse. Innovations in bioanalytical techniques, such as mass spectrometry and chromatography, have revolutionized blood testing, allowing for the detection of trace amounts of substances and their metabolites with unparalleled sensitivity and specificity [4-8].
- **Hair tests:** Hair tests offer a unique window into an individual's substance use history, capturing drug use patterns over an extended period. Advances in forensic science and hair analysis methodologies have refined hair testing techniques, making them more reliable and informative. Furthermore, the integration of biomarker analysis and genetic testing into hair testing protocols has enriched the diagnostic capabilities of this screening method, enabling the identification of genetic predispositions and metabolic variations that may influence susceptibility to substance abuse.
- **Saliva tests:** Saliva tests have emerged as a promising alternative to traditional screening methods, offering a non-invasive and convenient means of detecting recent drug use. Technological innovations in point-of-care testing devices and molecular diagnostics have enhanced the accuracy and efficiency of saliva tests, making them increasingly popular in various healthcare settings, including schools, workplaces, and community outreach programs.

Types of Screening Tests

Substance abuse screening encompasses a diverse range of testing methodologies, each offering unique advantages in terms of accuracy, sensitivity, and suitability for different contexts and populations. Understanding the various types of screening tests available is crucial for healthcare professionals, educators, parents, and adolescents alike, enabling informed decision-making and facilitating timely interventions when necessary [11-15].

Urine Tests

Definition: Urine tests, also known as urinalysis, are one of the most commonly employed screening methods for detecting the presence of illicit substances in adolescents.

Key Features:

- **Non-invasive:** Requires only a urine sample, making it relatively straightforward and comfortable for adolescents.
- **Cost-effective:** Generally less expensive compared to other screening methods, making it accessible for widespread use in various settings.
- **Broad detection window:** Can detect recent drug use within hours to days, depending on the substance and frequency of use.
- **High sensitivity and specificity:** Advanced analytical techniques ensure accurate and reliable results, minimizing false positives and negatives [11-15].

Blood Tests

Definition: Blood tests involve the analysis of blood samples to detect the presence of drugs or their metabolites in the bloodstream.

Key Features:

- **Comprehensive analysis:** Provides a detailed profile of substance levels, offering insights into metabolic processes and physiological effects.
- **Immediate detection:** Can detect recent drug use within minutes to hours, making it suitable for emergency situations and acute intoxication cases.
- **Highly sensitive:** Utilizes advanced bioanalytical methods, such as mass spectrometry and chromatography, to detect trace amounts of substances with exceptional accuracy.
- **Invasive:** Requires a blood sample, which may be perceived as more invasive and uncomfortable compared to other non-invasive screening methods [11-15].

Hair Tests

Definition: Hair tests involve the analysis of hair samples to detect the presence of drugs or their metabolites, providing a historical record of substance use over an extended period.

Key Features:

- **Long detection window:** Can detect drug use patterns over weeks to months, offering a comprehensive overview of substance use history.
- **Non-invasive:** Requires only a small hair sample, making it relatively easy and painless for adolescents.
- **Highly accurate:** Utilizes advanced forensic science techniques to analyze hair samples, ensuring reliable and informative results.
- **Subject to external contamination:** Hair tests may be influenced by environmental factors, such as exposure to second-hand smoke or contaminated substances, potentially compromising the accuracy of results [11-15].

Saliva Tests

Definition: Saliva tests, also known as oral fluid tests, involve the analysis of saliva samples to detect the presence of drugs or their metabolites.

Key Features:

- **Non-invasive:** Requires only a saliva sample, making it convenient and comfortable for adolescents.
- **Quick and easy to administer:** Can be performed on-site with minimal preparation, making it suitable for rapid screening in various settings.
- **Immediate detection:** Can detect recent drug use within minutes to hours, providing timely information for intervention and support.
- **Limited detection window:** Generally less sensitive compared to urine and blood tests, with a shorter detection window for some substances [11-15].

Challenges in Screening Adolescents

Substance abuse screening in adolescents presents a myriad of challenges that complicate the process of early detection, intervention, and support. These challenges, rooted in biological, psychological, social, and systemic factors, underscore the importance of adopting a comprehensive and empathetic approach to screening that takes into account the unique needs, vulnerabilities, and experiences of adolescents [5,8,9,11-15].

Social Stigma

Description: The pervasive stigma surrounding substance abuse often serves as a significant barrier to screening, dissuading adolescents from seeking help due to fear of judgment, ostracization, or repercussions from peers, family, and society at large.

Impact:

- **Underreporting:** Adolescents may conceal or minimize their substance use to avoid stigma, resulting in inaccurate or incomplete screening results.
- **Delayed intervention:** Stigma-driven reluctance to seek help may delay access to timely and appropriate interventions, exacerbating the adverse effects of substance abuse.

Privacy Concerns

Description: Privacy considerations pose ethical and logistical challenges in screening adolescents, particularly in school-based settings where balancing confidentiality with the duty to protect students' well-being is paramount.

Impact:

- **Confidentiality breaches:** Inadequate safeguards and protocols may compromise adolescents' confidentiality, undermining trust and deterring future participation in screening programs.
- **Legal implications:** Failure to adhere to privacy laws and regulations may expose healthcare providers, educators, and institutions to legal liabilities and sanctions.

Accuracy of Tests

Description: The accuracy and reliability of screening tests can be influenced by various factors, including the type of test, sample quality, timing, and individual variations in metabolism and excretion of substances.

Impact:

- **False positives and negatives:** Inaccurate test results may lead to unnecessary anxiety, stigma, and interventions for adolescents who do not misuse substances or fail to detect substance use in at-risk individuals.
- **Variable detection windows:** Differences in detection windows across screening methods may result in inconsistent and inconclusive findings, complicating interpretation and decision-making.

Adolescent Developmental Factors

Description: The unique physiological, psychological, and cognitive characteristics of adolescence, characterized by rapid growth, identity formation, risk-taking behavior, and susceptibility to peer influence, present specific challenges in substance abuse screening.

Impact:

- **Risk perception and decision-making:** Adolescents' evolving understanding of risk and decision-making capabilities may influence their willingness to participate in screening and adhere to recommended interventions.
- **Developmental variability:** Variations in maturity, cognitive development, and emotional regulation among adolescents may impact the appropriateness and effectiveness of screening methods and interventions.

Cultural and Socioeconomic Factors

Description: Cultural norms, values, beliefs, and socioeconomic factors can influence adolescents' attitudes towards substance use, help-seeking behaviors, access to screening services, and responsiveness to interventions.

Impact:

- **Cultural competency:** Inadequate cultural awareness and sensitivity in screening practices may result in miscommunication, mistrust, and disparities in access to and outcomes of screening and intervention programs.
- **Resource constraints:** Socioeconomic disparities in access to healthcare, education, and support services may limit adolescents' opportunities to participate in screening programs and access timely and appropriate interventions.

Newer Screening Methods

Substance abuse screening in adolescents has seen advancements in accuracy and methodology, aiming to effectively identify and address substance use disorders early on. Below is an overview of the latest developments in screening methods, including examples of false positives and false negatives to illustrate the nuances of accuracy [16-20].

Newer Screening Methods:

1. **Biological Markers:**
 - Utilizing biological samples such as urine, blood, or hair to detect the presence of drugs or their metabolites.
2. **Questionnaire-based Screening:**
 - Structured assessments to evaluate substance use patterns, frequency, and associated risk factors.
3. **Psychosocial Assessment:**
 - Comprehensive evaluation of psychological and social factors contributing to substance use behaviors.
4. **CRAFT (Community Reinforcement and Family Training) Screen:**
 - A family-focused approach that assesses family dynamics and interactions to identify potential substance abuse issues among adolescents.

Accuracy of Test Section:

Screening Method	False Positive Example	False Negative Example
Biological Markers	A urine test indicating the presence of opioids due to prescribed medication for pain relief.	A negative blood test failing to detect intermittent cannabis use.
Questionnaire-based	Questionnaire indicating frequent alcohol use due to misinterpretation of occasional social drinking.	Overlooking substance abuse in a respondent who underreports due to fear of consequences.
Psychosocial Assessment	Misdiagnosing substance abuse based on external behavioral cues without considering underlying mental health issues.	Failing to identify substance abuse in a high-functioning adolescent due to lack of observable symptoms.

In addition to established screening methods, newer tools such as the Brief Screener for Tobacco, Alcohol, and other Drugs (BSTAD) and the Screening to Brief Intervention (S2BI) screen have emerged. BSTAD offers a concise yet comprehensive assessment of substance use across various categories, while S2BI provides a structured approach for identifying and intervening in substance use disorders among adolescents. These tools enhance the arsenal of screening options available to healthcare professionals, allowing for more tailored and effective interventions to address substance abuse in adolescents [1,16]. The Brief Screener for Tobacco, Alcohol, and other Drugs (BSTAD) is designed to quickly assess substance use among adolescents across a range of substances, including tobacco, alcohol, and illicit drugs. It provides a concise yet thorough evaluation, typically consisting of a few questions targeting each substance category. This allows healthcare professionals to efficiently gather information about the adolescent's substance use patterns and identify potential areas of concern [17-20]. On the other hand, the Screening to Brief Intervention (S2BI) screen offers a structured approach to screening for substance use disorders in adolescents. It not only assesses substance use but also incorporates brief interventions aimed at addressing any identified issues. S2BI guides healthcare professionals through the screening process, ensuring a comprehensive assessment and providing recommendations for appropriate interventions based on the severity of substance use [15,16]. Both BSTAD and S2BI add valuable tools to the screening process, offering healthcare professionals flexibility and guidance in identifying and addressing substance abuse issues in adolescents. By incorporating these newer screening methods into practice, healthcare providers can enhance their ability to effectively intervene and support adolescents in managing substance use disorders [17,18]. Substance abuse screening in adolescents encompasses various tools and methods aimed at identifying problematic substance use early on. Utilizing a range of screening instruments, from the DSM-5 TR criteria for Substance Use Disorder to newer tools like the Brief Screener for Tobacco, Alcohol, and other Drugs (BSTAD), healthcare professionals can assess substance use patterns comprehensively. Risk factors for drug abuse, including genetic predispositions, environmental influences, and mental health conditions, underscore the importance of early detection and intervention [16,18,19].

Laboratory Testing: Commonly tested drugs in laboratory screenings include opioids, cannabis, cocaine, amphetamines, and benzodiazepines. The duration of time these substances remain detectable in biological samples varies, with factors such as drug half-life, metabolism, and frequency of use influencing detection windows. For instance, cannabis metabolites can be detected in urine for up to 30 days in chronic users, while cocaine typically remains detectable for up to 2-4 days [19,20].

Blood and Hair Drug Screening: Blood tests offer a shorter detection window compared to urine tests, generally detecting recent drug use within a few hours to days, depending on the substance. However, hair drug testing provides a longer window of detection, spanning several months to even years. This is because drugs and their metabolites become incorporated into hair as it grows, allowing for retrospective analysis of substance use over an extended period.

Incorporating these screening methods into adolescent healthcare settings enables early identification of substance abuse issues, facilitating timely intervention and support for at-risk individuals. By understanding the nuances of each screening method and the characteristics of commonly abused substances, healthcare professionals can effectively address substance use disorders in adolescents and promote healthier outcomes.

Benefits of Early Detection

Early detection of substance abuse in adolescents is paramount in mitigating the detrimental effects of drug and alcohol misuse, fostering healthier outcomes, and reducing the societal burden associated with substance abuse-related complications. Recognizing the signs and implementing timely interventions can significantly alter the trajectory of an adolescent's life, offering opportunities for recovery, growth, and positive change [1-8, 21,22].

Prevention of Long-Term Health Issues Early detection facilitates the timely identification and management of substance use disorders, minimizing the risk of developing chronic health conditions, including cardiovascular diseases, liver damage, neurological impairments, and mental health disorders. By intervening during the critical developmental stages of adolescence, healthcare providers can address underlying issues, promote healthier behaviors, and mitigate the long-term health implications of substance abuse.

Intervention and Treatment Planning

Early detection enables healthcare providers, educators, and support networks to develop personalized and comprehensive intervention and treatment plans tailored to the unique needs, preferences, and circumstances of adolescents. By leveraging multidisciplinary approaches, evidence-based practices, and collaborative care models, stakeholders can optimize the effectiveness of interventions, enhance engagement and retention in treatment, and facilitate sustained recovery and well-being.

Reduction in Societal Costs

Early detection and intervention in adolescents yield substantial economic benefits by reducing healthcare expenditures, productivity losses, legal fees, and social welfare costs associated with substance abuse-related complications. By investing in prevention, education, and support services, communities can allocate resources more efficiently, foster resilience, and promote healthier lifestyles, ultimately reducing the societal burden and enhancing the quality of life for individuals and families affected by substance abuse.

Importance of Confidentiality

Confidentiality serves as a cornerstone in fostering trust, promoting open communication, and safeguarding the rights, privacy, and dignity of adolescents participating in substance abuse screening and intervention programs. Adhering to ethical and legal standards regarding confidentiality is essential in building resilient and supportive environments that empower adolescents to seek help, engage in treatment, and navigate the complexities of substance abuse with confidence and confidentiality [23-25].

Legal Considerations

Maintaining confidentiality is not only an ethical imperative but also a legal requirement governed by federal and state regulations, including the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and state-specific confidentiality laws pertaining to minors' rights to privacy. Compliance with these legal frameworks is crucial in protecting adolescents' confidentiality, ensuring accountability, and mitigating the risk of legal liabilities and sanctions associated with breaches of privacy and confidentiality.

Ethical Implications

Respecting and preserving adolescents' confidentiality uphold fundamental ethical principles, including autonomy, respect for persons, beneficence, and nonmaleficence. By prioritizing adolescents' privacy rights, healthcare providers, educators, and support networks can foster trust, build rapport, and cultivate therapeutic relationships grounded in mutual respect, understanding, and collaboration, thereby enhancing engagement, adherence, and outcomes in substance abuse screening and intervention programs [4-8].

Building Trust with Adolescents

Confidentiality serves as a catalyst in building trust, strengthening relationships, and promoting open communication between adolescents, healthcare providers, parents, guardians, educators, and support networks. By establishing clear and transparent confidentiality policies, procedures, and safeguards, stakeholders can create safe and supportive environments where adolescents feel valued, heard, and empowered to share their concerns, seek assistance, and participate actively in their recovery journey with confidence and trust.

Role of Parents and Guardians

Parents and guardians play a pivotal role in supporting, guiding, and advocating for adolescents navigating the challenges of substance abuse, offering unconditional love, understanding, and encouragement in their journey towards recovery, resilience, and well-being [1-4,23].

Recognizing Signs of Substance Abuse

Parents and guardians are often the first to observe and recognize subtle changes in adolescents' behaviors, attitudes, and performance indicative of substance abuse. By being vigilant, empathetic, and proactive, parents and guardians can facilitate early detection, intervention, and support, empowering adolescents to confront their issues, seek help, and embrace healthier lifestyles and coping strategies.

Open Communication

Open communication serves as a cornerstone in fostering trust, promoting understanding, and strengthening relationships between parents, guardians, and adolescents. By creating supportive, non-judgmental, and empathetic communication channels, parents and guardians can engage in meaningful dialogue, address concerns,

share information, and collaborate effectively with adolescents, healthcare providers, educators, and support networks in developing personalized and holistic approaches to screening, intervention, and recovery [1-4,23].

Seeking Professional Help

Parents and guardians play a crucial role in advocating for adolescents' well-being by seeking professional help, guidance, and support from healthcare providers, counselors, therapists, and support networks specializing in substance abuse prevention, intervention, and treatment. By collaborating with interdisciplinary teams, participating actively in treatment planning, and fostering resilience, parents and guardians can navigate the complexities of substance abuse, empower adolescents to make informed decisions, and facilitate sustained recovery, growth, and positive change in their lives [1-4,23-25].

Conclusion

In conclusion, substance abuse screening in adolescents remains a critical component of public health initiatives, reflecting the growing recognition of the importance of early detection, intervention, and support in mitigating the adverse effects of substance abuse and promoting healthier lifestyles and coping strategies among adolescents. By embracing innovation, fostering collaboration, prioritizing confidentiality, and empowering adolescents, parents, guardians, healthcare providers, educators, and support networks to work together towards common goals, we can enhance the effectiveness, accessibility, and impact of substance abuse screening initiatives, ultimately fostering resilience, promoting recovery, and cultivating thriving communities where adolescents can flourish and realize their full potential.

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