

Substance Use Disorder

WHAT IS SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER?

Substance use is different for everyone and can be viewed on an ever-changing spectrum with varying stages of benefits and harms. **Substance use disorder (SUD)** is a complex condition in which there is uncontrolled use of a substance despite harmful consequences. People who actively use substances are at risk of SUD, which affects a person's brain, leading to an inability to control the use of legal or illegal drugs or medications.

Examples of substances that may lead to a substance use disorder include tobacco (nicotine), cannabis, alcohol, opioids, hallucinogens, inhalants, sedatives, and stimulants.

If you or someone you know may be experiencing a substance use disorder, consider speaking with a health professional, including a dental hygienist. You can also explore the resources provided at the end of this fact sheet for additional support.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Substance use disorder may manifest in various ways, including:

- Ongoing desire to use the substance or unsuccessful attempts to cut down or control use
- Continued use despite known problems and interference with daily life
- Withdrawal symptoms when attempting to stop using the substance, such as irritability, agitation, nausea, stomach pain, body aches, chills, sweating, and insomnia

RISK FACTORS

Several factors can increase the risk of developing a substance use disorder, including:

- History of abuse or trauma
- Family history of substance use
- Mental health conditions
- Peer pressure, early use, and social norms



IMPACT ON HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Substance use can increase the risk of:

- Mental health conditions and decrease well-being
- Problems with maintaining relationships (friends, family, romantic, etc.)
- Blood-borne infections (e.g., HIV, hepatitis) from sharing drug paraphernalia
- Damage to the liver, kidneys, lungs, or other organs
- Driving or operating machinery impaired, resulting in harm to self or others

IMPACT ON ORAL HEALTH

Substance use can significantly affect oral health. Depending on the substance, substance use can lead to:

- [Dry mouth](#) (xerostomia)
- [Tooth sensitivity](#) and [tooth decay](#),
- [Periodontal \(gum\) disease](#), gum recession, and tooth loss
- [Enamel erosion](#), tooth wear and staining
- Dental trauma such as broken or cracked teeth
- [Teeth grinding](#) and jaw pain
- Oral candidiasis (thrush), impaired tissue healing
- Increased risk of [oral cancer](#)
- [Bad breath \(halitosis\)](#)

WHY DISCLOSURE IS IMPORTANT

It is essential to disclose substance use to your dental hygienist at every appointment because treatment plans may need to be modified to avoid drug interactions and other safety risks.

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ROLE OF THE DENTAL HYGIENIST

- Provide a non-judgemental space
- Review health history and medications to ensure no contraindications with treatment plans
- Offer smoking or vaping cessation advice and resources
- Provide education on dry mouth relief
- Provide instruction on the most effective way to brush and clean between teeth and educate on oral health risk factors
- Provide advice on healthy eating
- Scale (clean) teeth to remove plaque bacteria and hardened plaque buildup (tartar). If left on teeth it can cause gum disease
- Apply topical fluoride or other agents to strengthen and desensitize teeth
- Perform regular oral cancer screenings and educate on self-screenings

HOME CARE RECOMMENDATIONS

- Brush twice daily using a soft toothbrush and low-abrasive fluoride toothpaste
- Clean or floss between teeth daily
- Gently brush the tongue daily
- Eat a nutritious, well-balanced diet low in sugar
- Stay hydrated by drinking water
- Avoid acidic foods and beverages
- Schedule regular dental hygiene appointments for preventive care

HELPFUL RESOURCES

Treatment and recovery are different for everyone. Many resources can help support individuals in recovery, including counselling, self-help groups, medications, and treatment programs.

- Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) – **1.800-463-6273** or www.camh.net
- Find mental health and addiction services in your community: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/mental-health-services>
- Kids Help Phone – 1.800-668-6868
- Get help with substance use: <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/substance-use/get-help-with-substance-use.html>
- ConnexOntario free 24/7 Access: <https://www.connexontario.ca/en-ca/> or call 1-866-531-2600
- 9-8-8 Suicide Crisis Helpline: <https://988.ca/> or call/text 988

As professional health-care providers, dental hygienists are primarily concerned with promoting good oral health. Dental hygiene is among the largest of the regulated health-care professions in the province. In Ontario all dental hygienists are registered with the College of Dental Hygienists of Ontario, which regulates the profession to ensure the public receives safe and ongoing comprehensive oral care.

VFS25.1

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