Risky Substance Use Is Under-Treated and Inadequately Treated in Primary Care Settings

Proper treatment for alcohol dependence is rare.
- Overall, recommended care for alcohol dependence is received 10.5% of the time.¹

Substance use is under-screened and under-treated
- In a 1998 National Survey, 7,371 people visited a general medical provider in the past year. Of those, 29% were asked about alcohol or drug use in the past 12 months. 51.4% of problem drinkers (those with positive AUDIT scores) did not receive any advice, and 22.5% were told to only "stop drinking" by their GMP.²
- Analyses of national datasets showed that 74%, 67%, and 56% of workers who screened positive for alcohol abuse/dependence, drug abuse/dependence, or major depression on the NCS survey, respectively, reported that they have never seen a mental health or medical specialist for their symptoms.³

Substance use is under-identified in primary care
- A national cross-sectional survey of physicians in outpatient settings found that 88% usually or always ask new outpatients about alcohol use; however, among those patients who drink, only 13% of physicians reported using formal alcohol screening tools.⁴
- 32.1% of primary care physicians carefully screen for substance abuse.⁵

Specialty care is under-utilized
- 74.1% of patients reported their primary care physician was not involved in their decision to seek treatment for substance abuse.⁵
- Data from a National Survey showed that 72% of people with co-occurring mental and substance use disorders did not receive any specialty mental health or substance abuse treatment in the past 12 months. Only 23% received appropriate mental health care.⁶
- Only 11% of the 23.5 million Americans who needed treatment for an illicit drug or alcohol use problem received specialty treatment.⁷

Treatment prevalence for mental disorders has improved, but is still low.
- Data from the National Comorbidity Survey showed that 20.3% of patients with a mental disorder, including substance-abuse disorders, received treatment between 1990 and 1992 and 32.9% received treatment between 2001 and
2003. Between the two time periods, the largest increase occurred in the general medical sector (3.9% to 10%) and the distribution of treatment in the general medical sector increased from 31.5% to 49.6%.  

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7 SAMHSA. Results from the 2009 National Survey on Drug Use and Health. Rockville, MD; September 2010. Available at: http://oas.samhsa.gov/NSDUH/2k9NSDUH/2k9Results.htm#1.1


*Information used with permission from the Partners in Integration initiative funded by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, 2013, of which ICSI was a partner.*