

THE ASSIST PROGRAM

The ASSIST program is collaborative, research and training project focused on building the capacity of primary health to identify and respond to substance use disorders through a targeted Screening, Brief Intervention and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) framework. The ASSIST program is delivered and maintained by a team of two research fellows, based at the University of Adelaide; Associate Professor Robert Ali (MBBS, FACHAM, FAFPHM) and Dr Matthew Stevens.

Associate Professor Robert Ali is an experienced Public Health Physician with over 30 years working as the Clinical Director at Drug and Alcohol Services South Australia (DASSA). Robert also sits on a number of advisory councils, including the WHO Expert Advisory Committee on Drugs, and the NHMRC advisory committee which updated the new low-risk drinking guidelines. Professor Ali regularly delivers SBIRT training to health professionals in a range of settings, including General Practice, Community Mental Health, and rapid turnover clinical settings such as Emergency Departments. He has maintained a strong relationships with both ACRRM and RACGP to deliver training and clinical expertise to their membership. Dr Matthew Stevens is a new addition to the research team. Matthew has a PHD in psychological medicine, with a particular focus on the prevention and treatment of behavioural addictions.

The ASSIST program is funded through an Australian Commonwealth Government Grant. The program shares the aim of the National Drug Strategy 2017-2026 to contribute to ensuring safe, healthy and resilient Australian communities through minimising alcohol, tobacco and other drug-related health, social, and economic harms among individuals, families, and communities. The ASSIST program objective is to strengthen the capacity of the primary health and welfare sectors to identify and intervene early or refer to treatment people who have substance use disorders by improving access to screening and targeted interventions for at-risk groups. This can be done using the ASSIST screening instrument.

WHAT IS THE ASSIST?

The ASSIST is a WHO-endorsed screening and brief intervention framework designed to help clinicians identify and respond to substance use disorders. ASSIST screens for all drugs, legal and illegal and stratifies risk for each substance into low, moderate and high levels.

ASSIST has several advantages over other screening tools. First, ASSIST covers all drugs, including legal drugs like alcohol or tobacco, and illegal drugs like cannabis, methamphetamine or opioids (and more). Importantly, ASSIST is also able to identify use of non-medical use of prescription drugs. The benefit therefore, over other screening tools, is that ASSIST can also capture polydrug use which is an increasingly common occurrence in primary health settings.

HOW DOES ASSIST CONNECT TO PRIMARY HEALTH?

By providing primary healthcare clinicians with the tools to manage low to moderate risk substance use disorders in-clinic, the ASSIST also has the capacity to reduce the burden of unnecessary referrals to specialist AOD services. The ASSIST triages risk for the patient into low, moderate or high risk for each substance, and connects that stratification to an appropriate intervention. For low and moderate risk clients, a purpose-built brief intervention is appropriate.

Therefore, these patients can and should be managed by the primary health clinician rather than being referred to specialist services.

For high-risk cases however, an ASSIST score can also be used as the basis of a referral to specialist AOD service for further assessment or treatment. Only those at high-risk are candidates (those who score 27+ on a given drug) to be referred to specialist AOD services for assessment and treatment if required.

We have therefore actively encouraged the primary healthcare sector to use the ASSIST to identify those who are at high risk of dependence, and respond by sending only those individuals for further specialist AOD assessment.

Currently, some specialist AOD services require an ASSIST assessment as part of the referral process. Having an awareness of the ASSIST and how it connects primary and specialist AOD services will be an important feature of the prevention of substance use disorders moving forward.

RESOURCES

[The ASSIST Portal](#) is a one-stop shop that has all the ASSIST resources. This includes downloadable and fillable [ASSIST forms](#) – the same form which you will find in Best Practice Medical Software from April 2022. The Portal also includes a self-directed eLearning course on how to administer the ASSIST and provide the structured intervention. The course is registered as a CPD activity. The ASSIST Portal also contains a number of downloadable resources, as well as videos to watch how it's done.

Several instructional manuals designed for Health Professionals in various settings are also available. These include: [ASSIST on Ice](#) (designed to address methamphetamine use); [ASSIST with Substance](#) (designed for nurses in acute and primary healthcare settings); [ASSIST-Y](#) (for young people aged 10-14 years) and [ASSIST-Y](#) (for adolescents aged 15-17 years); the [Telephone and Video Consultation manual](#) (designed for Health professionals conducting virtual consultations in the COVID-19 era). In Addition, the ASSIST has been translated in a number of languages.

A brief version of the ASSIST has also been developed for high turnover settings. The [ASSIST-Lite](#) is an ultra-rapid screening tool, ideal for time pressured areas such as emergency departments. The eASSIST and eASSIST-Lite (the electronic versions) are also available for online completion through the Portal. This reduces the time required to administer the instrument as well as scoring the results.

The ASSIST Checkup and ASSIST Checkup Lite are downloadable smartphone apps designed for self-completion. The apps also have a diary function to allow the user to monitor their alcohol and other drug consumption. Both apps are available on both iOS and Android platforms and can be accessed through the Portal.

[The ASSIST Plus website](#) has been developed for people who may be concerned about their own substance use, or the use by friends or relatives. It includes downloadable [self-help](#) sheets which provide tips and tricks on cutting down and stopping substance use. The site also contains information about a range of substances, an opportunity to do a self-assessment and provides advice on how to cut down or stop using. There are also three videos on the site: how to complete the ASSIST, tips on how raise concerns with someone whom you think may have a problem, and testimonials from people with a lived experience.

Further enquiries

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