

“Treating Between the Lines”

Understanding Rx & Illicit Drug Abuse

Vermont State Dental Society

September 19, 2025

Learning Outcomes

At the end of the presentation, the dental professional will be able to:

Detect patients with substance abuse disorders using the physical, oral, and behavioral clues of the 3 most commonly abused drugs; depressants, stimulants, and opioids. *Note: Marijuana not included in course content.

Discuss substance abuse with patients and communicate effectively your professional responsibilities and ethical boundaries in treating patients with substance use disorders.

Select appropriate preventive and restorative treatment strategies, using a caries-risk assessment that includes substance use.

Step 1: Detection

Depressants- Benzodiazepines (Valium, Elavil, Xanax, Klonopin, Ativan), barbiturates (Phenobarbital, Mebaral), sleep aids (Soma, Sonata, Lunesta), alcohol which cause euphoria, calmness, and relaxation.

- Physical Clues: Drowsiness, clumsiness, spider angiomas, dilated pupils, irritability, amnesia
- Oral Clues: Dry mouth, lingual erosion, oral cancer, periodontal disease



Stimulants- Adderall, Ritalin, Focalin, Concerta, methamphetamine, cocaine, crack, ecstasy which cause euphoria, energy, attention, focus and hypersexuality.

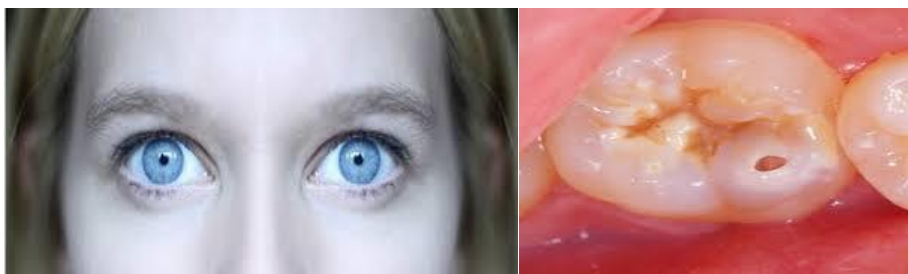
- Physical Clues: Insomnia, mood changes, dilated pupils, elevated blood pressure, extreme weight loss, skin pops
- Oral Clues: Dry mouth, “meth mouth” (blackened, broken, rotted teeth), extremely poor oral hygiene, attrition



Step 1: Detection (continued)

Opioids-Vicodin, Oxycodone, Methadone, Fentanyl, heroin which cause euphoria, analgesia, anti-anxiety, state of well-being.

- Physical Clues: Lethargy, constricted pupils, track marks, weight loss, pain intolerance, hypothermia
- Oral Clues: Dry mouth, cuspal caries, poor oral hygiene, attrition



Step 2: Discussion

- Use motivational interviewing
- Educate your patients about the risks associated with Rx and illicit drug misuse, dependency, addiction
- Be objective
- Speak about your core professional values of building relationships, improving oral health outcomes, and helping your patients.

Step 3: Selection of Treatment

- Assess each patient's caries risk status (low, medium, high) by evaluating behavioral factors (drug use patterns, dietary habits, consumption of sweetened foods/beverages), and clinical indicators (presence of plaque, white spot lesions, % carious teeth)
 - Reference ***Meth Mouth Treatment Plan Assessment Form***
- Develop an individualized treatment plan that target the patient's current risk level with the goal that these interventions will lower the patient's caries risk status.
- Interventions include:
 - In-office anti-microbials to reduce the periodontal pathogens

Step 3: Selection of Treatment (continued)

- Non-alcoholic mouthwash for home use
 - Dietary education to decrease consumption of fermentable carbohydrates including sweetened beverages
 - Topical fluoride varnishes
 - Use of direct restorations and cautious use of indirect restorations including complex prosthesis
- Refer patients to trained professionals specializing in the treatment and management of substance use disorders
 - Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Facility Locator. [Home - FindTreatment.gov](#) and **1-800-662-HELP**
 - VT Helplink is a free and confidential alcohol and drug support and referral service provided by the Vermont Department of Health. VT Helplink can connect your patients to the services you need. A caring, trained specialist will help them take a step toward recovery. [VTHelplink.org](#) or call 802-565-LINK or toll-free 833-565-LINK

Resources

- The Vermont Practitioner Health Program (VPHP) is a health service of the Vermont Medical Society created for the benefit of Vermont's health professionals. VPHP assists practitioners dealing with impairment or risk of impairment due to use of drugs, including alcohol, as well as impairment caused by any factor that interferes with cognition, judgment or behavior. [Vermont Practitioner Health Program — Vermont Medical Society](#) or call 802-223-0400

Resources (continued)

- Substance Use Disorder and Mental Health Collaborative Care Training, CARE (Collaborative to Advance Mental Health Treatment and Substance Use Recovery for Everyone) Series of webinars and trainings to learn how to treat mental health and substance use disorders in primary care and other settings. Contact Robin.N.Miller@vermont.gov, Robin Miller RDH, MPH- Oral Health Director, Vermont Department of Health
- Patient Information Sheets - Drug Information Sheets for parents, educators, and care providers. [Drug Fact Sheets | Get Smart About Drugs](#), [Resources to Help Patients | Vermont Department of Health](#), and [ADAP Opioid Patient Information.pdf](#)
- Sample Consent Form [ADAP EXAMPLE Acute Opioid Rx Informed Consent.pdf](#)
- Rule Governing Safe Disposal of Unused Drugs (great resource from KY) [Pharmaceutical Controlled Substance Disposal General Public Fact Sheet.pdf \(ky.gov\)](#)
- Brown R., Chan WY & Whyte F. (2023) C.E. Credit. **Harm Reduction: A Strategy to Improve Outcomes for Dental Patients with Substance-Use Disorders**, Journal of the California Dental Association, 51:1, DOI: [10.1080/19424396.2023.2242570](https://doi.org/10.1080/19424396.2023.2242570)
- Brown RE, Morisky D, Silverstein SJ. **Meth Mouth Severity in Response to Drug-use Patterns and Dental Access in Methamphetamine Users**, Journal of the California Dental Association, 41:6, 421-428, DOI: [10.1080/19424396.2013.12222319](https://doi.org/10.1080/19424396.2013.12222319)

Resources (continued)

- **A State of Decay, Your Dental Guide to Understanding and Treating “Meth Mouth,”** by Ronni Brown, DDS, MPH. Available at: [A State of Decay: Your Dental Guide to Understanding and Treating "Meth Mouth": Brown, DDS, MPH, Ronni: 9781732562486: Amazon.com: Books](#)
- **Meth Mouth Treatment Plan Assessment Form©** by Ronni Brown, DDS, MPH, FADI to guide clinical decision making in patients with the oral effects of methamphetamine use. Available at [Resources | Dr. Ronni Brown](#)
- **Patient Brochures on the Oral Effects of Methamphetamine©** by Ronni Brown, DDS, MPH, FADI Patient Brochures to educate patients about the oral impacts of methamphetamine misuse. Available at [Resources | Dr. Ronni Brown](#) and [Prevent Meth Mouth | Educational brochures for dental practices](#)
- **How to use fluoride varnish in patients with “meth mouth.”** by Ronni Brown, DDS, MPH. Dental Products Report 51(9), 2017. [How to use fluoride varnish in patients with ‘meth mouth’](#)
- Sheff, D. **Beautiful Boy: A Father's Journey Through His Son's Addiction.** Beautiful Boy chronicles the heartbreaking and inspiring experience of survival, relapse, and recovery in a family coping with addiction over many years.
- **“Take Your Pill”** Netflix Original Movie. In a hypercompetitive world, drugs like Adderall offer students, athletes, coders, and others a way to do more, faster and better. But at what cost? [Watch Take Your Pills | Netflix Official Site](#)