



The Norman Knight Nursing Center
for Clinical & Professional Development

PCAs Quick Reference: Substance Use Disorder

The cases of SUD and Domestic Violence have dramatically increased since COVID 19. People quarantined at home with many losing their jobs and income have resulted in this increase.

What is substance use disorder?

Substance Use Disorder (SUD) can be defined as the overuse of, or dependence on, a drug(s) or alcohol leading to effects that are harmful to one's physical and mental health, and/or the welfare of others. The big difference between SUD and substance abuse, is SUD includes *overuse* and not only *abuse* as part of the disorder. The term SUD also is preferred as it seeks to remove the stigma attached to the term "substance abuse".

What do you need to know?

- SUD is often chronic and worsens over time with continued use, that is why you may see the same patients over and over again on your unit
- There is a genetic connection – if you have family members who have SUD, you are at an increased risk of developing a SUD
- SUD generally begin during 18-25 years of age
- Alcohol use disorders are more common than illicit drug use disorders
- SUD is related to medical complications which can lead to death – HIV, Hepatitis C, liver disease, cancer malnutrition, seizures, stroke and heart attack to name a few
- Treatment can and does work

What can you do when caring for a patient with SUD?

- Have patience when caring for these patients, as they can be very agitated, angry, irritable, and/or verbally aggressive. This is generally related to their illness.
- Do not take their behavior personally – their poor behavior is likely directly related to their illness and NOT you or the care you are delivering.
- Do not engage in a verbal struggle or argument with the patient, simply remove yourself and seek out the nurse caring for the patient.
- Do not judge or criticize patients with this disorder, like any other illness, they did not ask for this illness and are likely to feel bad enough about the diagnosis.
- Seek out your unit leadership for support caring for this patient population, as these patients can be very challenging to work with.
- Inform the nurse immediately if there is any change or concern you have regarding the safety status of a patient with SUD. Mental health illnesses such as depression and thoughts of harming oneself can become present at any time.
- Not all patients are honest about their use of alcohol due to embarrassment. If you notice any of the following signs and symptoms, notify the nurse assigned to the patient immediately:

Withdrawal Signs & Symptoms

- Trembling in their hands – from mild to severe.
- Nausea and/or vomiting
- Headache
- Sweating
- Increase in heart rate and/or blood pressure
- Anxiety
- Irritability trouble sleeping
- Confusion/Hallucinations
- Fever