

Participation in Australian drug treatment programs for individuals engaging in high-risk substances use: Data from a nationally representative sample

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Introduction: Substance use, including drugs, alcohol, and smoking, has significant health, social, and economic impacts. We aimed to assess treatment access rates and associated factors among individuals with high-risk substance use.

Method: This cross-sectional study used data from the 2019 Australian National Drug Strategy Household Survey (N=22,015). Participants included individuals with high-risk substance use identified through the Alcohol, Smoking, and Substance Involvement Screening Test - Lite (ASSIST-Lite) and current smokers. Self-reported engagement in tobacco, alcohol, or other drug treatment programs in the past 12 months was measured.

Key Findings: Of the participants, 0.4% had high-risk drug use (0.3% cannabis, 0.1% meth/amphetamine, 0.1% opioids), 7.4% had high-risk alcohol use, and 14.0% were current smokers. Treatment access rates for those with high-risk use in the past 12 months were 50.6% for opioids, 27.1% for meth/amphetamine, 14.5% for cannabis, 9.6% for alcohol, and 11% for smoking. Information and education were the primary sources of treatment support (12.7% drugs, 4.6% alcohol, 4.0% smoking), followed by counseling (6.7% drugs, 4.5% alcohol, 3.0% smoking). Online or internet support was accessed by 5.9% (drug) and 1.6% (alcohol) among high-risk users. Psychological distress was associated with treatment access (drugs: OR=3.03 [0.77-11.95], p=0.111; alcohol: OR=3.16 [2.20-4.56], p<0.001; smoking: OR=1.95 [1.52-2.49], p<0.001).

Discussions and Conclusions: The proportion of high-risk substance users accessing treatment remains low, particularly for alcohol-related issues. Information and education are the predominant treatment approaches, but they may not be sufficient for high-risk users. Public health strategies to enhance treatment access are necessary to provide more effective interventions.

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