

# BRIEF INTERVENTION

The ASSIST-linked brief intervention for  
hazardous and harmful substance use

Manual for use in primary care



World Health  
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# 1 Nature and purpose of this manual

This manual is a companion to *'The Alcohol, Smoking and Substance Involvement Screening Test (ASSIST): manual for use in primary care'*<sup>1</sup> and is based on *'Brief Intervention for Substance Use: Guidelines for Use in Primary Care. Draft Version 1.1 for Field Testing'*<sup>2</sup>. The purpose of this manual is to explain the theoretical basis and evidence for the effectiveness of brief interventions and to assist primary health care workers in conducting a simple brief intervention for clients whose substance use is putting them at risk. Together with the companion manual<sup>1</sup>, this manual presents a comprehensive approach to screening and brief intervention which is tailored to the specific circumstances of primary care and is designed to improve the health of populations and client groups as well as of individuals. This manual describes:

- the rationale for brief intervention in primary care;
- a model of behaviour change;
- the components of brief interventions that work;

- principles of motivational interviewing and essential skills;
- how to link the ASSIST screening procedure with a brief intervention;
- how to give feedback to clients;
- how to conduct brief intervention for people at moderate risk;
- examples of ASSIST-linked brief interventions;
- how to help clients who inject drugs;
- how to address multiple substance use;
- how to give longer or recurrent interventions.

Although the manual is particularly aimed at primary health care workers, it may also be useful for others who work with high-risk clients or clients who are more likely to engage in drug use such as hospital physicians and nurses, midwives and obstetricians, social workers, prison workers and community correction workers.

## 2 What is the ASSIST-linked brief intervention?

As the Alcohol, Smoking and Substance Involvement Screening Test (ASSIST) was developed mainly for drug use but can be used for other substances including alcohol and tobacco as well, particularly in high prevalence settings, it is being considered as an instrument of choice when the goal is to address a range of different psychoactive substances. Thus, the focus of this manual is mainly on drug use rather than alcohol or tobacco use, because of the relative lack of tools around screening and brief intervention for illicit drugs within primary health care settings. The brief intervention technique described in this manual is focused predominantly on modifying behaviour of drug users around the substance used most frequently or the one causing the most problems for the client (as identified by the client or highest ASSIST score). However, the techniques described in this manual also can be used to target alcohol and tobacco use, particularly in poly-drug use, although it is likely that this would take longer than 3 minutes.

The ASSIST-linked brief intervention is a short intervention lasting 3 to 15 minutes given to clients who have been administered the ASSIST by a health worker. The ASSIST screens for use of all substance types (tobacco products, alcohol, cannabis, cocaine, amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS), sedatives, hallucinogens, inhalants, opioids and 'other' drugs) and determines a risk score ('lower', 'moderate' or 'high') for each substance<sup>3,4</sup>. The risk scores are recorded on the ASSIST feedback

report card which is used to give personalised feedback to clients by presenting them with the scores that they have obtained, and the associated health problems related to their level of risk. Asking clients if they are interested in viewing their scores allows the health worker to commence a discussion (brief intervention) with the client in a non-confrontational way, and has been found to be a successful way of getting clients at moderate risk, in particular, to change their substance use<sup>5</sup>.

As outlined in *'The Alcohol, Smoking and Substance Involvement Screening Test (ASSIST): manual for use in primary care'*<sup>1</sup>, ASSIST scores are linked to the following risk categories and associated recommended interventions (see Table 1).

