

# Key Questions to Consider When Seeking Substance Abuse Treatment



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*The Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA) maintains a Treatment Services in Canada Database, which includes more than 1,000 programs using various treatment approaches. Look for CCSA Addictions Databases at [www.ccsa.ca](http://www.ccsa.ca). Inclusion in the database does not imply endorsement by the Centre. To assist you in finding the most appropriate program for your needs, here are a series of questions to consider.*

## **Does the service provider conduct an initial assessment in order to develop an individualized treatment plan for each client?**

Not everyone has the same severity of alcohol and other drug problem. It is important for service providers to make use of standardized and validated assessment tools and techniques to determine the seriousness of the client's problem. Assessments provide critical information for the development of a unique treatment plan for the individual.

## **What is "Detox"?**

Detoxification or "withdrawal management" is a procedure supervised by medical and social science personnel (e.g., physicians, nurses, psychologists, social workers, etc.), that assists individuals who have been actively using or who have become dependent on alcohol and other drugs to safely and comfortably withdraw from using a drug or drugs. A number of prescription medications may be used (short-term and long-term) to assist in this process, and it may be necessary for the person to stay at a detox centre during this process. While residing at a detox centre, initial assessments and referrals are often made on behalf of the individual to more formal treatment programs.

## **Does the service provider vary the treatment plan according to the severity of the client's problem?**

People with low severity problems generally need low intensity, briefer services; those with more serious problems require higher intensity and lengthier treatment. Similarly, brief "outpatient" care may be appropriate when a person's misuse of alcohol or other drugs is relatively low in severity, whereas individuals with severe substance abuse problems may need detoxification and might need a residential setting where they can be stabilized and can receive the support and structure they need to change their behaviour.

**Does the service provider offer treatment to meet the unique needs of individuals with regards to gender, age, ethnicity and sexual orientation?**

Individuals should ideally receive unique treatment according to important characteristics such as gender, age and ethnicity. For example, some programs are geared specifically to youth, women, seniors, etc. Recent research underscores the fact that women often abuse alcohol and other drugs for very different reasons and in different contexts and settings than males. Accordingly, customized intervention and support services are required to meet the unique needs of some populations.

**Does the service provider insist on abstinence from all drugs or will they accept clients who wish to reduce or moderate their use?**

Some service providers insist on complete abstinence from all drugs before, during and after treatment, and will dismiss participants if they are caught using. Other service providers use a “harm reduction” approach. This approach recognizes that some individuals may be unwilling or unable to discontinue use completely. The approach also recognizes the fact that many individuals are capable of reducing or moderating their use of alcohol and other drugs and can successfully maintain a modified use pattern over the long-term.

**Does the service provider offer a full range of services to address all relevant needs of participants?**

Comprehensive, well-designed programs recognize the wide-ranging impact of substance use on a person’s physical and mental health, family, friends and employment, and offer services to address issues such as infectious diseases, co-existing mental health issues, and various social, vocational, employment and legal challenges the person may be experiencing. Some programs involve the family to help them understand and support the process of behaviour change.

**What kinds of treatment techniques are effective?**

Effective programs actively teach participants skills and techniques and train them to anticipate and cope with a wide range of situations that are “high risk” for substance use, and to minimize the damaging effects of potential slips, lapses, and relapses. In fact, if handled well, a “slip” can be turned into a positive experience for the person that leaves them stronger and better prepared to successfully handle future situations when they arise. Some of the more prominent evidence-based techniques include role-plays, active rehearsal and repetitive practice, cognitive-behavioural relapse prevention training, and coping skills training.

**Does ongoing assessment take place during the program? Does the treatment plan change according to the client’s progress and changing needs?**

An individual’s treatment needs may change and evolve over the course of a program. Accordingly, it is important that the service provider monitor, re-assess and modify both the detailed components and overall plan for each participant.

## **Does the service provider offer maintenance, aftercare and post-treatment support?**

The process of change does not end on the final day of treatment. A key ingredient in a person's long-term success may include post-treatment maintenance sessions, aftercare and post-treatment support. Some research has found that clients who attend maintenance and aftercare sessions are more likely to successfully change their behaviour over the long-term.

## **Other questions?**

You should feel free to ask other questions of any prospective treatment provider. For example, you may want to inquire about the treatment setting, length of care, cost, typical day, staff qualifications, etc.

*This document was prepared by Dr. John Weekes, Senior Researcher, Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA). It is intended to provide current, objective, and empirically-based information to individuals and their friends and family as they look for effective treatment services for substance abuse problems.*

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