

## What is Unhealthy Substance Use?

**Unhealthy substance use** refers to a spectrum of use that can result in negative medical, functional, and social outcomes. Primary care staff and clinicians can assess for unhealthy use in routine office visits:

### Alcohol:

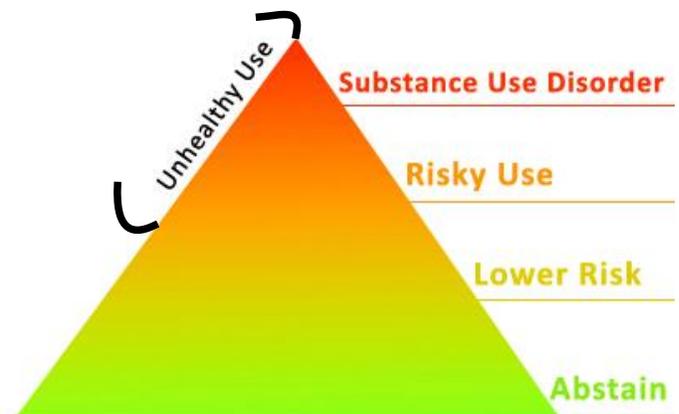
Demographic	Questions for Assessment	Unhealthy Alcohol Use
Men < 65	How many times in the past year have you had more than 4 drinks on an occasion?	> 4 drinks/occasion > 14 drinks/week
All Women and individuals ≥ 65	How many times in the past year have you had more than 3 drinks on an occasion?	> 3 drinks/occasion > 7 drinks/week

### Drug Use:

Questions for Assessment	Unhealthy Drug Use
How many times in the past year have you used an illegal drug or used a prescription medication for non-medical reason?	Any use of illicit drugs, or prescription drugs for non-medical reasons

## What is the difference between risky use and substance use disorder?

Figure adapted from the distribution of patients' substance use data from: NSDUH, SAMHSA, 2013  
<http://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/NSDUHresultsPDFWHTML2013/Web/NSDUHresults2013.htm>



Both risky use and SUD are considered unhealthy substance use and can lead to poor health outcomes, but they differ based on the following:

### **Risky Use:**

- Epidemiologic studies have shown that using substances above the unhealthy use cut-offs can lead to health effects, even when patients don't have a substance use disorder
- Health effects are wide-ranging

### **Substance Use Disorder:**

- DSM-V diagnosis
- Not defined merely by quantity or frequency but by criteria relating to:
  - Use despite consequences on life or health
  - Substance cravings
  - Loss of control (e.g. inability to stop using the substance)

For further information visit [www.bmc.org/addiction](http://www.bmc.org/addiction)