

GUIDE FOR USING THE
DRUG ABUSE SCREENING TEST (DAST)

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Why assess Drug Use?

Systematic assessment of drug use and abuse is necessary for ensuring good clinical care. Measures, which are both reliable and valid, provide information to the practitioner, which can be used for identifying problems (early if possible) and for evaluating the effectiveness of treatment. As well, this information is useful for matching patient needs with tailored intervention.

The Drug Abuse Screening Test (DAST) was designed to provide a brief, self-report instrument for population screening, clinical case finding and treatment evaluation research. The DAST yields a *quantitative* index of the degree of consequences related to drug abuse. This instrument takes approximately 5 minutes to administer and may be given in either a self-report or interview format. The DAST may be used in a variety of settings to provide a quick index of drug abuse problems.

DAST-20 and DAST-10 Version

The original DAST contained 28 items that were modeled after the widely used Michigan Alcoholism Screening Test (Selzer, American Journal of Psychiatry, 1971, 127, 1653-1658). Two shortened versions of the DAST were devised using 20-items and 10-items that were good discriminators. The 20-item DAST correlated almost perfectly ($r = .99$) with the original 28-item DAST is measuring the same construct as the longer scale. Moreover, the internal consistency reliability (alpha) was extremely high (.95 for the total sample, and .86 for a subsample that excluded clients with only alcohol problems). Good discrimination is evident among clients classified by their reason for seeking treatment. Most clients with alcohol related problems scored 5 or below, whereas the majority of clients with drug problems scored 6 or above on the 20-item DAST. The DAST-10 correlated very high ($r = .98$) with the DAST-20 and has excellent internal consistency reliability for such a brief scale (.92 total sample and .74 drug abuse).

Measurement properties of the DAST were initially evaluated using a clinical sample of 256 drug/alcohol abuse clients (Skinner ...Addictive Behaviors, 1982). The internal consistency reliability estimate was substantial at .92. and a factor analysis of item intercorrelations suggested an unidimensional scale. With respect to response style biases, the DAST was only moderately correlated with social desirability and denial. Concurrent validity was examined by correlating the DAST with background variables, frequency of drug use, and psychopathology. A greater range of problems associated with drug abuse (DAST) was related to the more frequent use of cannabis, barbiturates and opiates other than heroin. With respect to psychopathology, the largest correlations were with the sociopathic scales of Impulse Expression and Social Deviation. High scorers on the DAST tended to engage in reckless actions and express attitudes that are markedly different from common social codes.

Furthermore, the DAST was positively related to interpersonal problems, suspiciousness, depressive symptoms and a preoccupation with bodily dysfunction. Thus, drug abuse tended to be manifests in, or covary with, other psychopathological characteristics. Finally, the DAST total score clearly differentiated among clients with (1) drug problems only versus (2) mixed drug/alcohol problems versus (3) alcohol problems only.

Advantages

1. The DAST is brief and inexpensive to administer.
2. It provides a quantitative index of the extent of problems related to drug abuse. Thus, one may move beyond the identification of a drug problem and obtain a reliable estimate of the degree of problem severity.
3. DAST scores could be used to corroborate information gained by other assessment sources (e.g. clinical interview or laboratory tests).
4. The routine administration of the DAST would provide a convenient device of recording the extent of problems associated with drug abuse. It would ensure that relevant questions regarding consequences of drug abuse are asked of all clients.
5. The DAST could provide a reference standard for monitoring changes in client population over time, as well as for comparing clients at different assessment centres.

Limitations

1. Since the content of the DAST items is obvious, clients may fake results.
2. Since any given assessment approach provides an incomplete picture of the client's status, there is a danger that DAST scores may be given too much emphasis. Because the DAST yields a numerical score, this score may be misinterpreted.

Administration and Scoring

The DAST may be administered in either an interview or self-report format. The self-report version is generally preferred since it allows the efficient assessment of large groups. In many circumstances one would expect the interview and self-report formats to give identical results. However, the assessment approaches may differ (1) when a client is particularly defensive or high on social anxiety which may produce under-reporting of problems in a face-to-face interview format, or (2) when a client has difficulty reading and understanding the content of items in the self-report version. The DAST should *not* be administered to clients who are presently under the influence of drugs, or who are undergoing a drug withdrawal reaction. Under these conditions the

reliability and validity of the DAST would be suspect. Thus, one should ensure that clients are drug free (detoxified before the DAST is administered).

The following introduction should be used for either interview or self-report formats: "The following questions concern information about your potential involvement with drugs *not including alcohol beverages.*"

"In the statements, 'drug abuse' refers to (1) the use of prescribed or over the counter drugs in excess of the directions and (2) any non medical use of drugs. The various classes of drugs may include: cannabis, (e.g. marijuana, hash), solvents or glue, tranquilizers (e.g. valium), barbiturates, cocaine, stimulants, hallucinogens (e.g. LSD), or narcotics (e.g. heroin). Remember that the questions *do not* include alcoholic beverages."

The DAST total score is computed by summing all items that are endorsed in the direction of increased drug problems. Two items: #4 (Can you get through the week without using drugs) and #5 (Are you always able to stop using drugs when you want to), are keyed for a "No" response. The other 18 items are keyed for a "Yes" response. For example, if a client circled "Yes" for item #1 he/she would receive a score of 1, whereas if the client circled "No" for item #1 he/she would receive a score of 0. With items #4 and 5, a score of 1 would be given for a "No" response and a score of 0 for a "Yes" response. When each item has been scored in this fashion, the DAST *total score* is simply the sum of the 20 item scores. This total score can range from 0 to 20.

Interpretation

The DAST total score orders individual along a continuum with respect to their *degree* of problems or consequences related to drug abuse. A score of zero indicates that no evidence of drug related problems were reported. As the DAST score increases there is a corresponding rise in the level of drug problems reported. The maximum score of 20 would indicate substantial problems. Thus, as the DAST total score increases one may interpret that a given individual has accrued an increasingly diverse range of drug-related consequences. Then, one may examine the DAST item responses to identify specific problem areas, such as the family or work. The following tentative guidelines are suggested for interpreting the DAST total score.

DAST Interpretation Guide

	DAST-10	DAST-20	Action	ASAM
None	0	0	Monitor	
Low	1-2	1-5	Brief Counseling	Level I
Intermediate (likely meets DSM criteria)	3-5	6-10	Outpatient (intensive)	Level I or II
Substantial	6-8	11-15	Intensive	Level II or III
Severe	9-10	16-20	Intensive	Level III or IV

ASAM: American Society of Addiction Medicine Placement Criteria

A low score does not necessarily mean that the client is free of drug related problems. One must consider the length of time the client has been using drugs, the client's age, level of consumption and other data collected in the assessment in order to interpret the DAST score. Since most of the alcohol abuse clients scored 5 or below, whereas most of the mixed drug/alcohol clients and drug abuse group scored 6 or above, a DAST score of 6 or greater is suggested for case finding purposes. Further research is planned to evaluate the diagnostic validity of alternative cutoff points on the DAST.

Availability

Copies of the 20-item and 10-item DAST may be obtained from the author (Harvey Skinner) or by contacting Marketing Services at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 33 Russell Street, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 2S1 Telephone: 1-800-463-6273 or visit the following websites: Harvey Skinner at: www.HealthBehaviorChange.org CAMH: www.camh.net

Key References

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Drug Abuse Screening Test (DAST-20)

Updated April 05, 2006 12:55 PM

This five-minute questionnaire, used in an interview or self-evaluation, can help gauge the severity of addiction to drugs other than alcohol.

- questionnaire • pad of 100 • \$9.95 in Ontario
- \$12.95 outside Ontario • published 1992
- product code PZ075

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ID#P14663 published May 23, 2006 6:07 PM