



## How to discuss substance use with patients.

Pregnant and postpartum people who use substances or who are in recovery may feel fear and shame. You can help minimize or eliminate this by taking simple measures when talking with your patients. Compassion and empathy can reduce stigma and result in open and productive conversations. Provide support and address patient needs by using some of these talking tips:

- **Let your patient tell their story.** Ask open-ended questions that allow them to tell their personal story... not just their substance use story.
- **Treat your patient with respect.** Sit at the same level with them and make eye contact.
- **Ask permission and provide options.** Explain to your patient that you care about them and that you want to partner with them in finding the help they need. Reassure them that they don't have to answer any questions that make them uncomfortable.
- **Normalize the conversation.** Tell your patient that it's perfectly normal to feel discomfort talking about this subject.
- **Be transparent.** Explain that you're asking specific questions so you can provide the best care possible for them and their baby.
- **Work collaboratively with your patient.** Remind them that recovery is possible, and that the path to recovery is different for everyone.

- **Address confidentiality concerns honestly.** Assure your patient that you respect their confidentiality and that you comply with the laws that protect it. Patients have the right to know about any limitations you face, so inform them of any instance where you are required by law to report a threat of harm to self or others.
- **Establish trust, show empathy, and listen actively.** Engage with your patient in a non-judgmental way. Treat them with respect and address their substance use condition not as a moral failing but as the medical disease it is.
- **Medication Assisted Treatment:** Medication assisted treatment (MAT) with methadone or buprenorphine is the gold standard of care for pregnant and postpartum people with opioid use disorder. The RI Moms PRN Consultation Line can talk to you about MAT for your patient. Connecting your patient with a certified peer recovery support specialists is another way to help them access MAT.

## Explore additional resources and information.

These resources offer more information you might find helpful in your work with your patients.

- Prevent Overdose RI [preventoverdoseri.org](http://preventoverdoseri.org)
- Rhode Island Department of Health [health.ri.gov/addiction/for/pediatricians](http://health.ri.gov/addiction/for/pediatricians)
- Addiction Technology Transfer Center (ATTC) Network [attcnetwork.org](http://attcnetwork.org)

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# The heart of the matter

Tips to help you speak compassionately with pregnant and postpartum patients who may be using substances or who are in recovery



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use include mental health conditions and trauma, interpersonal violence, and housing insecurity. Pregnant and postpartum people who use substances may also experience fear and shame due to bias and discrimination.

For the birthing parent with substance use conditions, studies show that the risk of overdose increases in the first postpartum year. Although pregnancy can be a motivational time, the current overwhelming prevalence of fentanyl in the drug supply increases the risk of overdose during pregnancy and the postpartum period. Screening in the prenatal period is an opportunity to intervene early to mitigate or avoid poor outcomes.

### You have options for screenings.

Universal screening and referral to treatment for substance use and mental health for pregnant people and birthing parents identifies substance use conditions and high-risk prenatal substance use. It opens the door to interventions aimed at decreasing the risk of overdose in the perinatal and postpartum periods, as well as the risk of negative birth outcomes.

#### EVIDENCE-BASED SCREENING TOOLS

- **The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT)**  
Developed by the World Health Organization (WHO), this widely used alcohol screening tool assesses alcohol use and behaviors. Healthcare professional-administered and self-report versions are available.  
· Visit: [auditscreen.org](https://auditscreen.org)
- **The Drug Abuse Screen Test (DAST-10)**  
This drug use screening and treatment evaluation tool for adults and older youth can be conducted via self-report or interview format.  
· Visit: [sbirt.care](https://sbirt.care)
- **Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT)**  
This is a comprehensive public health approach to early intervention and treatment services for persons with, or at risk of developing, substance use disorders.  
· Visit: [samhsa.gov/sbirt](https://samhsa.gov/sbirt) | [risbirt.org](https://risbirt.org) | [sbirt.care](https://sbirt.care)

### It's not an easy conversation.

We've heard anecdotally that Rhode Island healthcare professionals sometimes feel they do not have the knowledge and/or resources they need to properly address the care of pregnant and postpartum patients who may be using substances or who are in recovery.

This guide will support you in screening and referring for substance use and mental health in your pregnant and postpartum patients. It includes information about the array of recovery, treatment, and maternal and child health resources available for pregnant and postpartum people who use substances, as well as resources for their friends and families.

### Some background about the issue.

Substance-exposed newborns (SEN) are infants who are prenatally exposed to substances that can affect their health, development, or behavior in the short and/or long term. Substances of exposure can include certain prescribed medications, illicit drugs, alcohol, cannabinoids, nicotine, and tobacco.

Annually in Rhode Island, at least 5% of the approximately 10,000 babies born are substance-exposed. Prenatal substance exposure increases the risk of negative health outcomes including but not limited to preterm birth, low birth weight, stillbirth, neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS), sudden unexplained infant death syndrome (SUID), fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD), and other birth defects. Other poor outcomes related to prenatal substance

### There are resources and supports for you and your patients.

What do you do if one of your patients screens positive for substance use and/or mental health conditions? Rhode Island has resources to help both healthcare professionals and patients.

#### FOR HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS

##### RI Moms PRN Consultation Line

The Rhode Island Maternal Psychiatry Resource Network (RI MomsPRN) has a free psychiatric telephone consultation service for healthcare professionals who have pregnant and postpartum patients with anxiety, depression, and substance use conditions.

Call: 401-430-2800

Visit: [womenandinfants.org/ri-momsprn](https://womenandinfants.org/ri-momsprn)

##### Free Educational Materials

Visit [tiny.cc/kpsszz](https://tiny.cc/kpsszz) to order free, printed Substance-Exposed Newborns materials to display and distribute in your clinical setting.

#### FOR PATIENTS

- **Prenatal and postnatal peer services** offer support from certified peer recovery specialists who have lived experience with pregnancy/parenting and substance use.  
401-895-6592  
[recoveryhope4momsri.com](https://recoveryhope4momsri.com)
- **Prevent Overdose RI** provides information on statewide treatment, recovery, and harm reduction resources.  
[preventoverdoseri.org/get-help](https://preventoverdoseri.org/get-help)
- **Family Visiting** services will come to your home or an agreed-upon location to provide support and services for pregnant people, children, and families.  
401-222-5960  
[health.ri.gov/familyvisiting](https://health.ri.gov/familyvisiting)
- **Rhode Island Buprenorphine Hotline** connects people with 24/7 immediate telehealth services to start buprenorphine treatment.  
401-606-5456
- **QuitNowRI - Quit Support for Adults (age 18 and older)**  
Rhode Island offers free, effective, customized, and confidential help for adults and youth interested in recovery from tobacco/nicotine addiction.  
[QuitNowRI.com](https://QuitNowRI.com)  
Text "Start" to 300500 | 1-800-QUIT-NOW  
Text "INSCRIBIR" to 300500 en español | 1-800-8-DEJALO
- **My Life, My Quit™ - Quit Support for Youth (age 13 to 17)**  
Text "Start" to 36072  
1-855-891-9989

