



# Quick Diagnostic Checklist: Substance Use vs. Medical Emergency in High-Risk Clients

This checklist supports clinicians in urgent settings where high-risk individuals (e.g., unhoused, immunocompromised, IV drug users, chronic illness) may present with overlapping substance use and medical symptoms. Use this tool to help differentiate and triage appropriately.

## Initial Observations

- ☐ Observe for fever, profuse sweating, or recent vomiting.
- ☐ Assess for slurred speech, tremors, or seizure activity.
- ☐ Check for evidence of injection sites or abscesses.
- ☐ Ask about recent medication changes or missed prescriptions.
- ☐ Evaluate for severe confusion, hallucinations, or unconsciousness.
- ☐ Note sudden vs. gradual onset of symptoms
- ☐ Ask collateral sources about recent substance use or overdose history.

## Red Flags – Immediate Medical Referral May Be Needed

- ☐ Unresponsiveness or inability to answer basic questions.
- ☐ Irregular pupil size or response inconsistent with reported drug use.
- ☐ Neck stiffness, seizure, or extreme disorientation.
- ☐ Symptoms worsen despite Narcan or medical intervention.
- ☐ Rapid or dangerously fluctuating vital signs.

## Next Steps Based on Findings

- If RED FLAGS present: Refer to ER or medical crisis unit.
- If substance use suspected with no red flags: Begin SUD screening and withdrawal protocol.
- If uncertain: Consult with medical provider and consider labs (e.g., CBC, CMP, tox screen).
- Document findings and re-evaluate within 1 hour if symptoms change or persist.

## Commonly Missed Diagnoses in High-Risk Clients

|                                                                      |                                                                     |                                                         |                                      |                                                  |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| HIV or Hepatitis-related symptoms (fatigue, weight loss, confusion). | Electrolyte imbalances (due to poor nutrition or chronic vomiting). | Bacterial infections from IV use (fever, skin lesions). | Dehydration or heat-related illness. | Medication withdrawal (benzos, antidepressants). |
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