Recognizing Signs of Drug Abuse

Problem

Drug abuse involves the use of an illegal or a legal drug for nonmedical purposes. Nurses caring for patients need to assess drug use since these drugs often induce physiological dependence. Abstinence will result in a withdrawal syndrome that will be physiologically and psychologically distressful for the patients.

Several drug categories that are commonly abused include sedative hypnotics, opioids, stimulants, hallucinogens, and marijuana.

Consequence

The nurse needs to be familiar with the common symptoms of drug abuse and assess the chronic use and physical dependence to prevent the withdrawal syndrome, ineffective treatments and risks to the patient and staff safety.

Solution

Here are some considerations and suggested ways to identify and address substance abuse in patients.

- Sedative agents include drugs like benzodiazepines and barbiturates.
  - These drugs are prescribed for relief of anxiety because they induce a state of relaxation; this increases their potential for abuse.
  - Patients on sedatives may present somnolent, unarousable, or with inadequate respiration.
  - After ensuring the As, Bs and Cs are intact, these patients can often sleep through their “high”.
  - Flumazenil is a specific antidote that can be used to counteract the respiratory depression of benzodiazepines.
- Withdrawal from these addictive agents may present as seizures or excitable syndromes.

- A gradual tapering of these drugs for the addicted patient is in order.

- These drugs have a synergistic effect with alcohol and should never be taken together.

- Opioid analgesics are clinically useful agents to combat pain.
  - Some members of this class, including heroin, are used for the euphoric state they produce.
  - These drugs can be taken orally, ingested or smoked.
  - Patients will present as somnolent, unarousable, and with respiratory depression.
  - After establishing the As, Bs, and Cs of resuscitation, the patient can sleep through their “high”.
  - Naloxone is a narcotic antagonist that helps overcome the effect of opiate overdose; since the half-life of naloxone is usually shorter than the ingested drug, it may need re-dosing.
  - The risk in using Naloxone with a chronically addicted patient is that it can precipitate an acute withdrawal syndrome.
  - The withdrawal syndrome for opioids includes a well characterized abstinence syndrome with lacrimation, yawning, sweating and tremors; this evolves into muscle cramps, abdominal pain, and anxiety that are uncomfortable for the patient.

- Stimulants are a group of drugs that leads to euphoria and confidence.
  - Drugs in this category include amphetamines and cocaine.
  - These drugs are widely abused and overdoses can lead to seizures, arrhythmias, accelerated hypertension and stroke.
  - The patient presents in a hyper-excitble state of mind and needs time to calm down in a safe and quiet environment.
  - Withdrawal of these drugs often leads to depression and symptoms associated with a depressed mood.
• Hallucinogens include phencyclidine (PCP), lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), and marijuana.
  ▪ These drugs are used for their ability to create a vivid, dreamlike state that is associated with euphoria.
  ▪ Overdoses can be treated in a calm environment that protects the patients.
  ▪ Benzodiazepines may be useful in treating these patients.

References

Avoiding Common Nursing Errors, Lisa Marcucci, MD, Editor, Lippincott Williams and Wilkins, 2010.

electronic Medicines Compendium (eMC): http://www.medicines.org.uk

Note: A narrated e-Learning module of this Nugget is available at LearningNurse.com.