

Medications for Treating Youth with Substance use Disorder



Recovery Research Institute at Massachusetts General Hospital

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Can addiction medications be prescribed for youth?

Yes. There are FDA-approved medications for AUD and OUD. They can be prescribed for youth aged 18+. The OUD medication buprenorphine (AKA Suboxone) is FDA-approved for people 16+.



At what age can these medications be prescribed?

Apart from buprenorphine for OUD which is approved for people 16+, other medications are only approved for ages 18+. However, people under 18 and their parents can work with prescribers to receive these medications "off-label", with careful monitoring and when benefits are judged to outweigh risks.

Risks

The level of risk depends on the medication.

Generally, **side effects of these medications are mild** and their benefits outweigh the risks.

Risk example: methadone carries risk for overdose especially when combined with alcohol or benzodiazepines like Xanax.

Benefits

Reduced cravings and overdose risk.

For many people, they can improve functioning and quality of life.



Are the benefits and risks different based on age?

Far less is known about addiction medications for youth, especially those under 18. Most of the research on these medications has been conducted with people 18+. More studies with youth are needed to understand the potential benefits and risks they carry for young people.



AUD = Alcohol Use Disorder | OUD = Opioid Use Disorder

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	Primary Substance	Age Limits	How it Works
Buprenorphine (also Suboxone, Sublocade, Brixadi)	Opioids	16+ (Suboxone, daily) 18+ (Sublocade, monthly) 18+ (Brixadi, weekly or monthly)	Reduces craving, withdrawal symptoms, and overdose risk by mimicking and blocking more harmful opioids
Methadone	Opioids (chronic, severe use)	18+ (under 18 requires parent permission)	Reduces craving and withdrawal symptoms, and unlike buprenorphine, its therapeutic effect (and side effects like overdose risk) continues to rise with increasing doses.
Naltrexone (also Vivitrol)	Opioids or alcohol	18+	Blocks the opioid receptor at the brain; blocks pleasurable effects of opioid and alcohol use
Acamprosate	Alcohol	18+	Stabilizes brain function impaired by alcohol use and withdrawal
Disulfiram	Alcohol	18+	Causes unpleasant side effects when ingesting alcohol, deterring use

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