

Substance Use Disorder Screening and Referral Among Adult and Adolescent Patients

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Introduction

Dental practices are an oft overlooked resource for identification and early intervention regarding problematic substance use (SUD) behaviors. Existing literature indicates that although dentists regularly encounter patients with problematic substance use and recognize the importance of screening for SUD, they have limited exposure to addictions training and generally lack systems to aid in screening, intervention, and referral to addictions treatment.¹

Critical gaps exist in knowledge regarding dentists' implementation of SUD screening: (1) most prior work in this area has focused on implementation of tobacco, alcohol, and – more recently – opioid screening, with very little work addressing dentists' implementation of screening for other substances of abuse, particularly cannabis; and (2) very little information exists regarding implementation of brief counseling, and referral to treatment.

Results

Figure 1. Frequency of screening for substance abuse behaviors among adult and adolescent patients (by substance category) reported by dentists.

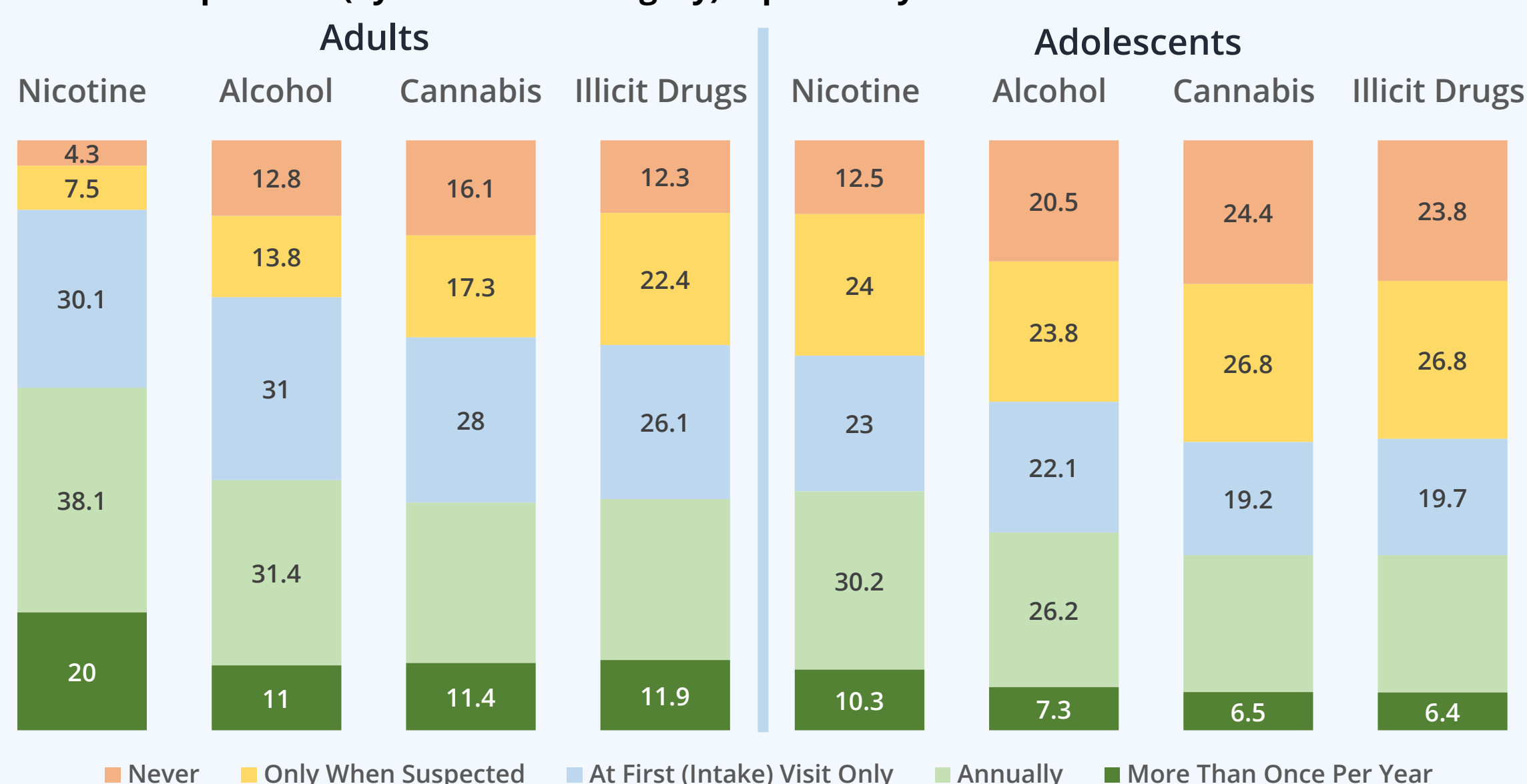


Figure 2. Frequency of counseling for substance abuse behaviors among adult and adolescent patients (by substance category) reported by dentists.

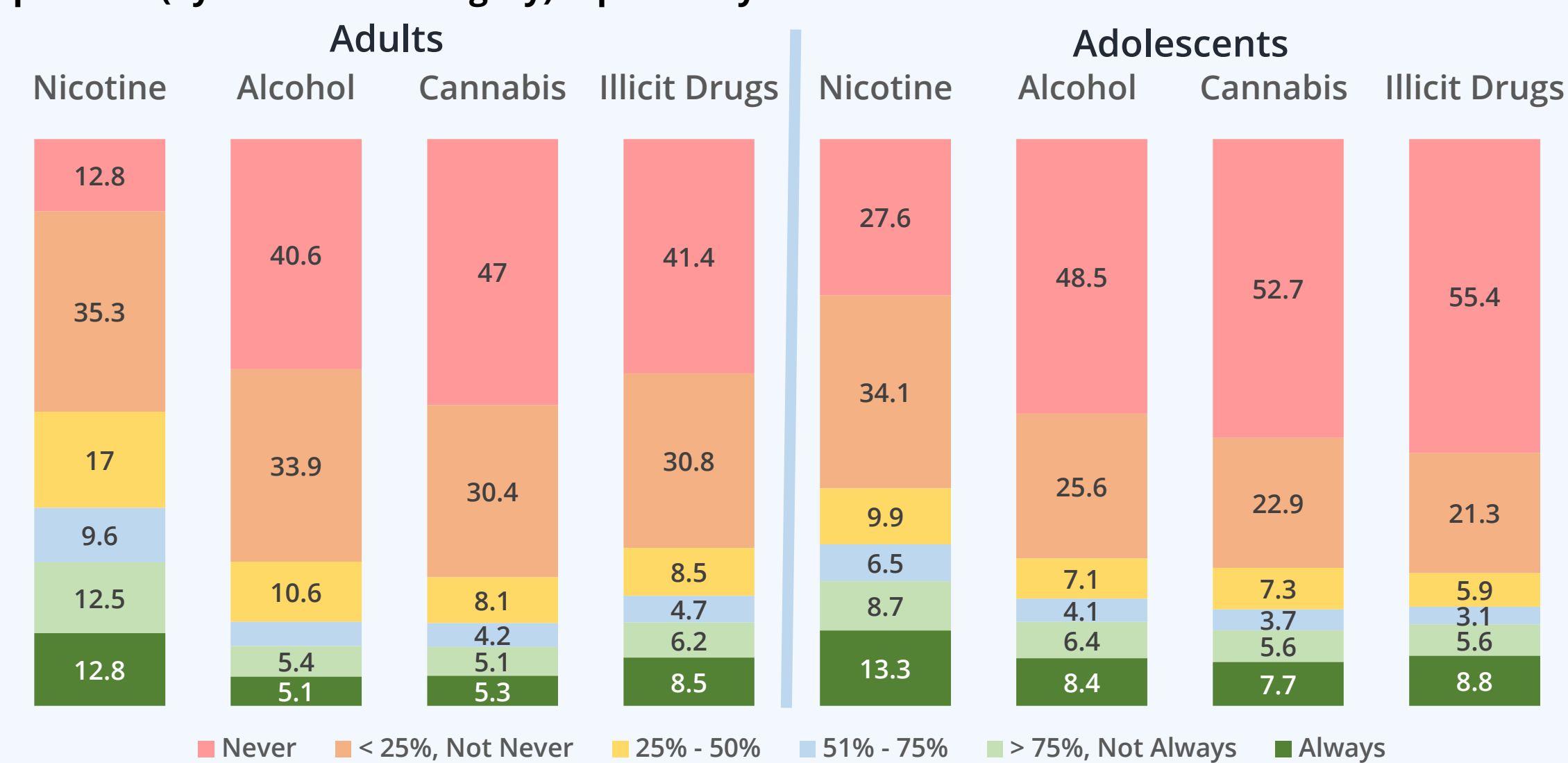
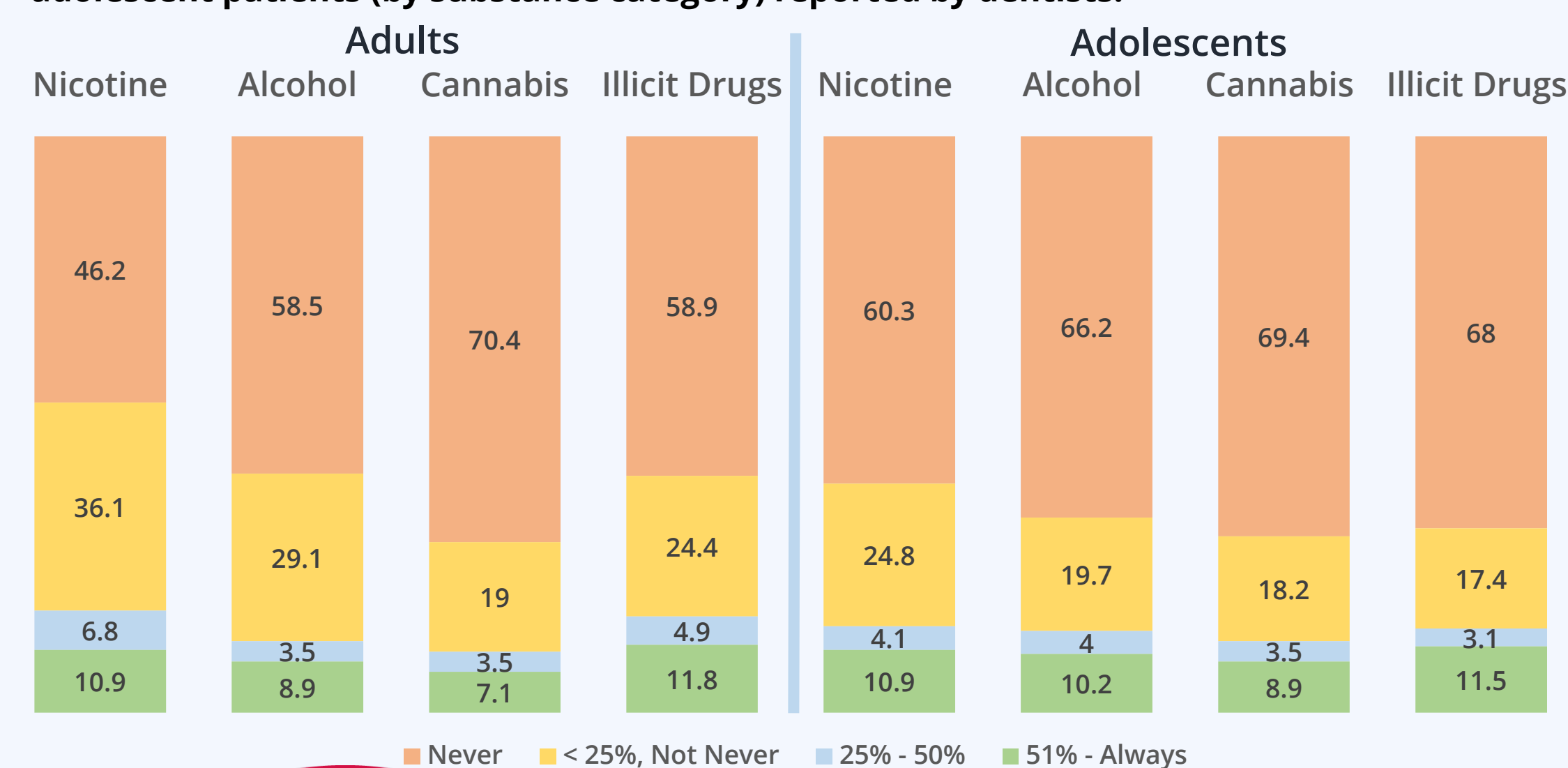


Figure 3. Frequency of providing referrals for substance abuse behaviors among adult and adolescent patients (by substance category) reported by dentists.



Methods

Study Design and Participants

This is a cross-sectional survey with dental practitioner members of the National Dental Practice-Based Research Network in the United States.

Data Collection

- 3125 Network dentists were invited to participate in an online survey about their current knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to patient substance use disorder screening.
- The enrollment was capped at 825.
- The recruitment process lasted for 11 weeks (from August 1, 2023, to October 16, 2023).
- A total of 821 dentists completed the survey.
- Out of these, 790 dentists served adult patients and responded to adult-relevant items.
- 751 dentists indicated that they served adolescent patients and responded to adolescent-relevant items.

Measures and Data Analysis

- Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics.
- Separate items assessed frequency of screening, counseling, and referral behaviors for adolescent and adult patients.

Conclusions

- Nicotine/tobacco was the substance most frequently reported by dentists for screening, counseling, and providing patient referrals, followed by alcohol.
- Except for nicotine (which is only for adults), between one-quarter and one-half of dentists reported they “never” counsel or follow up on positive screenings for high-risk substance use/Substance Use Disorder (SUD).
- The results highlight potential gaps in the opportunity for dentists to identify and address substance use behaviors and their impact on oral health among their adult and adolescent patients.
- The next steps for this project will involve identifying key barriers to the implementation of screening practices, as well as identifying potential facilitators for implementation.

Highlights

- Frequencies of screening, counseling, and referral practices were consistently lower among adolescent patients than adult patients.
- Nicotine/tobacco and alcohol use disorders were more frequently screened among both adult and adolescent patients than cannabis and illicit drug use.
- Accessible, easy-to-use tools that assist in patient screening, brief intervention, and referral to treatment should be developed and evaluated for their impact on dental SUD screening practices.