

Subjective Opiate Withdrawal Scale (SOWS): description, strengths and knowledge gaps^[1]

Purpose

The Subjective Opiate Withdrawal Scale (SOWS) is a client-reported assessment of the presence and intensity of opiate withdrawal symptoms.^[2] The SOWS is designed to complement the OOWS.

Drug(s) of Concern

Opioids/heroin

Observation Period

Last 5 mins

Populations Tested

- Males^[2]
- Adults^[2]

Settings Tested

- AOD specialist services^[2]

Diagnostics

Utility:

- ✓ Brief
- ✓ Easy to administer and score
- ✓ Might be better if used in combination with the OOWS, due to its subjectivity
- ✓ Particularly useful for clinical settings^[2]

Psychometric properties:

- Demonstrated to be a valid and reliable indicator of the severity of opiate withdrawal symptoms in detox patients^[2]

Subjective Opiate Withdrawal Scale (SOWS)

Please circle (o) one response for each question

Question
score

- | | | |
|-----|--|-----------------------|
| 1. | I feel anxious
0 Not at all 1 A little 2 Moderately 3 Quite a bit 4 Extremely | <input type="radio"/> |
| 2. | I feel like yawning
0 Not at all 1 A little 2 Moderately 3 Quite a bit 4 Extremely | <input type="radio"/> |
| 3. | I am perspiring
0 Not at all 1 A little 2 Moderately 3 Quite a bit 4 Extremely | <input type="radio"/> |
| 4. | My eyes are teary
0 Not at all 1 A little 2 Moderately 3 Quite a bit 4 Extremely | <input type="radio"/> |
| 5. | My nose is running
0 Not at all 1 A little 2 Moderately 3 Quite a bit 4 Extremely | <input type="radio"/> |
| 6. | I have goose flesh
0 Not at all 1 A little 2 Moderately 3 Quite a bit 4 Extremely | <input type="radio"/> |
| 7. | I am shaking
0 Not at all 1 A little 2 Moderately 3 Quite a bit 4 Extremely | <input type="radio"/> |
| 8. | I have hot flushes
0 Not at all 1 A little 2 Moderately 3 Quite a bit 4 Extremely | <input type="radio"/> |
| 9. | I have cold flushes
0 Not at all 1 A little 2 Moderately 3 Quite a bit 4 Extremely | <input type="radio"/> |
| 10. | My bones and muscles ache
0 Not at all 1 A little 2 Moderately 3 Quite a bit 4 Extremely | <input type="radio"/> |
| 11. | I feel restless
0 Not at all 1 A little 2 Moderately 3 Quite a bit 4 Extremely | <input type="radio"/> |
| 12. | I feel nauseous
0 Not at all 1 A little 2 Moderately 3 Quite a bit 4 Extremely | <input type="radio"/> |
| 13. | I feel like vomiting
0 Not at all 1 A little 2 Moderately 3 Quite a bit 4 Extremely | <input type="radio"/> |
| 14. | My muscles twitch
0 Not at all 1 A little 2 Moderately 3 Quite a bit 4 Extremely | <input type="radio"/> |
| 15. | I have cramps in my stomach
0 Not at all 1 A little 2 Moderately 3 Quite a bit 4 Extremely | <input type="radio"/> |
| 16. | I feel like shooting up
0 Not at all 1 A little 2 Moderately 3 Quite a bit 4 Extremely | <input type="radio"/> |

Total Score

Administrator, Rater, Scoring and Interpretation

Administrator: Clinician/Worker

Rater: Client

Scoring & interpretation: Clients score each SOWS item on a five-point scale (i.e., 0,1,2,3 & 4).
A total score is calculated by summing the responses to all 16 items. The minimum total score possible is 0, and the maximum total score possible is 64 (i.e. total score range: 0-64).

SOWS score interpretation^[2]

Score	Interpretation
1-10	Mild withdrawal
11-20	Moderate withdrawal
21 or more	Severe withdrawal

Resources

Tool citation: Handelsman, L., Cochrane, K., Aronson, M., et al. *Two new rating scales for opiate withdrawal*. American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse, 1987. 13(3): 293-308.^[2]

Copyright: Freely available. May be downloaded and used by clinicians.

Training/manual: None found.

Other: None found.

Knowledge Gaps

The SOWS has been widely mentioned in policy and clinical guideline documents. It is a client-reported measure of withdrawal experiences.

Within the Australian context:

- Content and construct validity, and responsiveness is uncertain
- Tool acceptance by raters is unclear.

A study conducted with the SOWS has suggested that there are sex-based differences in people with chronic pain who misuse prescribed opioids, with women experiencing much higher levels of pain and withdrawal symptoms.^[3] Given that few studies have examined opiate withdrawal through a gender lens, there is a need to better understand the extent to which males and females may experience and manage withdrawal differently. Research is required to examine how opiate withdrawal/assessment of withdrawal symptoms may differ between men and women.

References

1. Fischer, J.A., Roche, A.M., and Duraisingam, V. *Objective Opioid Withdrawal Scale (OOWS): description, strengths and knowledge gaps*. 2021, National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction (NCETA), Flinders University: Adelaide, South Australia. (overview citation)
2. Handelsman, L., Cochrane, K., Aronson, M., et al. *Two new rating scales for opiate withdrawal*. American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse, 1987. 13(3): 293–308.
3. Huhn, A., Tompkins, D., Campbell, C., and Dunn, K.E. *Individuals with chronic pain who misuse prescription opioids report sex-based differences in pain and opioid withdrawal*. Pain Medicine, 2019. 20(10): 1942–1947.