



alcohol and youth

supporting health and wellness

Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health for youth under the legal drinking age

- Any regular use involves risk of harm, more so than for adults
- Occasions of use involve risk, more so than for adults at the same amounts
- So, delay use as long as possible

According to the 2023 Adolescent Health Survey [ages 12-19 in grades 7-12]

- The percentage of school-aged youth in BC trying alcohol has declined over three decades to 38%, but the most common period for starting to drink is age 13-15
- The proportion of BC school-aged youth using alcohol in the past month has declined from 43% in 1998 to 23% in 2023
- Among BC school-aged youth, 13% (= a third of those who have used alcohol) engaged in heavy drinking episodes (5 or more drinks within a two-hour period) at least once in the past month

Why and how does alcohol guidance apply for youth?

People younger than 19 years old are not permitted to buy or have alcohol in British Columbia. However, more than a few older youth in the province are using alcohol on a regular basis – some in very risky ways. While formal guidance may not account for value youth find in this popular drug, it does recognize that alcohol can harm both physical and mental development, particularly in early adolescence yet continuing well into early adulthood (at least to age 24). Evidence also shows that heavy drinking episodes, rather hazardous for adults, increase risk of serious injury and other adverse consequences even more so for youth.

What are the key factors that impact risk for youth?

The risk factors for developing problematic patterns of alcohol use are complex and, thus, simplistic accounts are not helpful. Nonetheless, the following are important considerations.

Regularly drinking alcohol (and, in particular, frequent intoxication) in early adolescence is associated with both more immediate harm and increased problems later in life.

Childhood trauma is associated with both early alcohol use and quicker progression from first drink to heavy drinking.

When young people believe alcohol is easy to get, they tend to use it more and to experience more problems.

What can parents or other adults do to support youth?

Conversations about lower risk drinking that encourage young men and young women (and their role models) to drink alcohol in less risky ways – if they choose to drink – may be helpful.

Clear rules are helpful, but good communication in which the younger person feels comfortable and well understood is more important than monitoring and surveillance.

A commitment to early childhood development that minimizes the likelihood of experiencing trauma and provides early supports is critical.

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