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Mental health and substance use
information you can trust

YOUTH AND ALCOHOL

Young people benefit from having caring adults to talk with about their thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

Youth need support and guidance in navigating a culture where alcohol is widely advertised, socially acceptable, and commonly used by adults.

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According to the **2023 Adolescent Health Survey (AHS)**, most young people in BC do not drink alcohol or use other drugs, and the number of those who do use psychoactive substances is declining. What's more, most youth in Grades 7 through 12 report being in good overall health and having a good quality of life, though these numbers are lower than they were 10 years ago.

A significant number of youth in BC—approximately 38%—have tried alcohol (beyond a few sips). Almost 23% said they had at least one drink in the last month. Twelve percent (12%) said they'd had at least one drink on the Saturday before the survey.

So what exactly is the role of alcohol in the lives of teens who drink? We sat down with a Grade 11 student and asked her about her experiences and beliefs about alcohol and other drugs in relation to the AHS study findings.





@question Thirty-eight percent of youth say they've tried alcohol. That's lower than at any point in the last 30 years (e.g., 44% in 2018, 45% in 2013, 58% in 2003, and 67% in 1992). Why do you think young people are choosing not to drink alcohol?

There's more awareness about the harms of long-term alcohol use. It seems like fewer adults, particularly parents, are drinking these days. As youth often get alcohol from their parents, it makes sense that youth drinking rates would go down too. I think awareness campaigns have influenced parents who drink to make more conscious decisions, such as keeping alcohol out of sight and out of reach by locking it in liquor cabinets. There's also been an increase in mental health resources and open conversation around substance use. I think this is helping people make healthier choices.

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@question Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health (2023) suggests youth avoid alcohol as long as possible. What do you think of this guideline?

Any guidelines are beneficial. They should be shared widely. Alcohol guidelines, as well as cannabis and nicotine guidelines, should be posted in schools. We all know that some teens will choose to drink and smoke no matter what anyone says. And we all know horror stories of when it goes wrong. I think displaying guidelines where youth will see them often could influence them to make better decisions when using substances. It might save someone.

**“NOT TOO MUCH, NOT TOO OFTEN,
ONLY IN SAFE SITUATIONS”**

Simply telling young people not to drink is not likely to be very effective. But they may respond to suggestions around reducing their risks such as not drinking to the point of getting drunk, not making a routine out of drinking, and not drinking at all when it makes the most sense to avoid alcohol, for their safety or the safety of others. Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health suggests that youth delay drinking alcohol as long as possible.

@question Though drinking rates are declining, young people are starting to drink at younger ages (e.g., 28% first drank at age 12 or younger vs. 23% in 2018). The most common age for a first drink is 14. What age do you think is ‘too young’ to drink?

I can understand a small glass at 12-14 during a family function, if it comes from a trusted adult. I don't think it's that dangerous to drink at 14 if you're safe in this way. Substances of any kind can be really intimidating at that age, so I think most teens approach drinking with caution anyway. Partying and drinking large amounts of alcohol is where I would draw the line though. It's just too risky. There isn't enough education on safe substance use being taught in schools or shared in families. Sometimes risk turns deadly simply because the youth don't know when to call an ambulance or are too afraid to call because they worry about punishment.

@question Young people reported drinking for the same reasons as adults—to have fun, to socialize with others who are drinking, to manage stress or sadness, to deal with boredom. A few mentioned other reasons such as pain management (6%) and dependence on alcohol (1% of youth reported drinking daily.) Do any of these numbers surprise you?

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It intrigues me that 6% of youth use substances for pain. I feel like that's usually something you'd hear from an older person. They often have more experience with substance use, especially when it comes to alcohol. Alcohol doesn't particularly taste good to me, and it doesn't make me feel that great in the moment or afterwards. I can see how that statistic might work for cannabis, though. But that's because I view it as a substance that can be used medicinally.

@question Over half of youth who had used substances in the past 12 months reported no negative consequences: 29% said they were told they did something they couldn't remember, 22% passed out, and 13% got injured. Other consequences included arguing with family members, breaking up with romantic partners, damaging property, having sex when they didn't want to, and physically fighting. Do these consequences resonate with you?



Pretty much. I went to a bush party for Halloween with my boyfriend and my best friend. All of us had made plans for rides home before we got there. Some people at the party weren't drinking at all because they were designated drivers. I had a couple of drinks, but I made sure not to push it because I broke my foot and was on crutches. My boyfriend had quite a few. Some people had fireworks, but they only lit them if they were sober. If they weren't, I saw people giving them to somebody who was sober and capable. There was one small fight, and one person threw up, but other than that nothing major happened. My friends and I made sure to check on each other consistently throughout the night, and we let each other know every time one of us was leaving the fire pit. We stick together to keep each other safe, especially because I heard girls are more vulnerable to harm from alcohol. It turns out that boys have more water in their bodies and more of an enzyme that breaks down alcohol, so they process alcohol more efficiently than girls. Faster and longer exposure makes alcohol more harmful for girls. I can see though that if these precautions weren't in place, a lot worse things could happen.

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@question Youth were asked if they felt or had been told that they needed help for their substance use. Those who said yes were most likely to report needing help for their vaping. Thoughts?

Vaping is a problem, but I don't think it's as bad as the media portrays it to be. Most youth I know keep their distance from vapes because they understand how risky they are based on their own observations. There's a lot of stigmas around it because of the constant berating of vapers and campaigns against vaping. It makes some youth believe that vapes are as bad as cigarettes, but I don't think it's true. Sure, there's not enough research on vapes to say if they are safer, but one thing I learned is that vapes do not contain most of the cancer-causing chemicals that lit cigarettes do. To me, the real harm with vapes is that they're so easy





to use and therefore easier to get addicted to. Some people think vape companies use flavourings just so young people will like it and want more of it. But flavourings do more than that. If you hit a vape, there's no lingering smell. Even if someone did smell it on you, it wouldn't smell bad because they are flavoured. Cigarettes, on the other hand, make you smell bad because of the smoke, and it's kind of embarrassing when everyone knows you just smoked a dart.

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Alcohol plays a part in the lives of many British Columbians, including young people. Like adults, young people who drink enjoy the social aspects of alcohol use. Young people seem to have some awareness of the risks associated with using alcohol. They may have gained this knowledge through their own experiences or those of others. Even so, it's clear that young people need adult support and guidance around alcohol use, not to mention other aspects of life in a society filled with mixed messages about substances. We can help young people by being there for them when they need us, listening to their issues, engaging them in respectful dialogue, and modeling healthy behaviours and attitudes.



For more information, check out these resources:

Substance Use and Young People

You and Substance Use: Stuff to think about and ways to make changes (workbook)

Hosting a Teen Party

With Open Arms

If you or someone you care about needs help, contact the Alcohol and Drug Information Referral Service to find support in your area. To get help anywhere in BC, call **1-800-663-1441**. In Greater Vancouver, call **604-660-9382**.

References:

THE BIG PICTURE: An overview of the 2023 BC Adolescent Health Survey provincial results. McCreary Centre Society

YOUTH AND ALCOHOL



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Canadian Institute for
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