

Adolescent Substance Use

Substance use refers to the consumption of substances like alcohol, drugs or other chemicals that can change thoughts and behaviours. Due to their ability to alter thoughts and perceptions, they are called “psychoactive.”

There is a wide variety of substances that are both legal and illegal. The most common substances used by Canadian youth are alcohol and cannabis. The adolescent years pose some of the most difficult challenges – teens sometimes feel as though no one understands their feelings. As a result, they may feel angry, alone, and confused while facing complicated issues about identity, peers, sexual behaviour, drinking, and drugs. Using substances at a young age increases the risk of adult dependence, and chronic use leads to brain changes.

Occurrence and Prevalence

Alcohol is usually the first substance that is used by many young people in middle and high schools. The use of both alcohol and cannabis become common between grades 7 and 12, with alcohol consumption being double that of cannabis.

Symptoms

Symptoms of substance use include:

Effect on education

Missing school, difficulty with schoolwork and being indifferent about it.

Effect on relationships

Strained relationships with family and friends, hanging out with a new group of friends who are disconnected from home and school.

Behaviour towards the substance

Craving for the substance constantly, seeking the substance compulsively and using it continuously despite the harm caused by it.

Effect on behaviour

Changes in sleeping and/or eating patterns, increased secrecy, mood swings, irritability and change in personality.

Treatments that Work

Psychotherapy – Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) or other similar approaches that focus on motivation seem to be successful. Family therapy may also be used.

Day or Residential Programs and Recovery Homes – Day programs includes both treatment and schoolwork for teens in a small group at a particular location. Residential programs are more intensive, and the teens stay for the duration of the treatment, ranging from a few weeks to a few months. Recovery homes provide a supportive environment and train individuals with life skills to recover from substance use and prepare to live independently.

Resources – [Talking with teenagers about drugs](#), Government of Canada

References –Canadian Mental Health Association Ontario: [Understanding substance use and addiction](#)