

EMPOWERED PARENTS

Navigating conversations about
drugs and decisions with your child





❖ You, Your Teen & Drugs

Let's take a moment to look back at what it was like for you growing up. When you were a teen how did you learn about alcohol and other drugs? What messages did you get? Were they accurate? Did you have a safe person you could go to if you had questions or concerns? Was that person a parent or guardian?

How about now...? Do think your teen would feel comfortable talking with you about drugs and do you feel equipped to talk with your teen?

This booklet was designed to empower you to become that safe person. One who can have meaningful and accurate conversations about drugs with your child.

The articles are short and can be read in any order. Some content has links that can help you learn more about the topic. At the end you will also find a list of resources that can come in handy as you and your teen navigate substance use at any stage.

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❖ Is Everybody Doing It?

The good news is that teens today are less likely to use drugs and alcohol than your generation was. Overall, rates of teen substance use are on the decline. But it's not all good news, of those who are using there is a greater chance they will start using at a younger age than previous generations.

Substance use rates and trends among BC students (Grade 7 -12)

Alcohol

About half of BC students have tried alcohol beyond a few sips, with use of alcohol increasing by grade. The average age of first use is around 14.

Cannabis

39% of youth reported having tried cannabis, surprisingly this has not changed much in the past 10 years. The average age of first use is between 13 and 15. Like alcohol, the rates of use do increase by grade.

Smoking

15% of all youth had tried smoking tobacco, and 1 in 4 of those first smoked by the age of 12.

Vaping (nicotine)

1 in 4 youth reported that they had tried vaping, of those about 25% vaped daily.

***Data sourced from the
BC Adolescent Health Survey 2023***



❖ Why Youth Use Substances

Just like adults, youth use substances due to their perceived benefits. By better understanding the reason why a youth might see using a substance(s) as meeting a need, it gives us an opportunity to explore alternative ways to meet that need.





❖ The Science Behind Teen Impulsive Decisions

The teenage brain is still developing, which can lead to impulsive and risky decisions. Two key parts of the brain are growing at different rates:

- The part that controls emotions and rewards (the limbic system) matures earlier and is highly active during adolescence.
- The part that helps us plan and control our actions (prefrontal cortex), isn't fully developed until the mid-20's

This imbalance causes emotions to often take the lead.

Teens are more likely to react to their feelings despite the consequences. They also experience stronger feelings of reward from activities that release dopamine, a brain chemical that makes us feel good. For example, bonding with friends or doing something thrilling triggers dopamine.

Dopamine is also released at high levels when using substances like nicotine. As a result, teens may be more influenced by their peers and choose risky behaviors over safer options.

This is part of how teens learn and develop as they grow to be independent.

❖ What you can do:



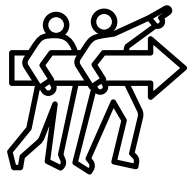
Build connection

Talk regularly and listen. Teens make better choices when they feel heard.



Have clear expectations

Consistent rules help teens make smart decisions.



Show the way

Model good choices for your teen to follow.



Fulfill the need

Help your teen find exciting, lower-risk hobbies like sports or arts.



Praise good decisions

Recognizing smart choices builds confidence and encourages responsibility.





❖ Talking with Teens About Alcohol and Other Drugs

When we talk with our teens about the importance of wearing a seatbelt, it's not because we are expecting a car accident - we do it because we want them to be as safe as possible if an accident happens.

Teens who understand how seatbelts can reduce the risk of injuries or death in an accident are not more likely to speed or drive dangerously, but they are more likely to take measures to be safe when in a vehicle.

Where to start

Talk openly and often about substances, focusing on facts rather than fear.

Show you care that they make choices that keep them healthy and safe.

Listen to their perspective and encourage questions.

Help them reflect on how their choices align with your family's values.

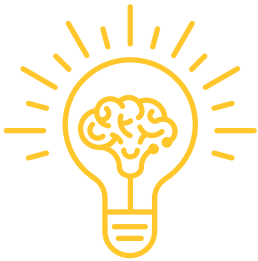
Create opportunities for connection so that your child can feel safe and valued.

⌘ Practical tips

Just say “know”

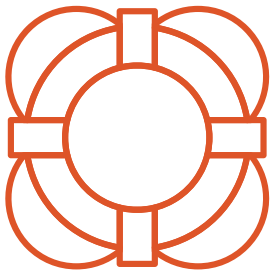


You don't have to be an expert. If you don't know about different kinds of alcohol and other drugs, find reputable sources online and learn together. Talk about the risks of mixing substances, the time it takes to have an effect. Talk with them about overdose, the importance of only taking pharmaceutical medications as they are prescribed for you, and let them know the risks of using drugs that are unregulated (illegal) and not knowing what is in them.



Brainstorm refusal skills

Saying 'No' is not as simple as it sounds - even for youth who don't want to use alcohol or drugs. Brainstorm with your teens other ways to refuse substances that might work for them, like: "I don't like the way it makes me feel", "I have to work tomorrow."



Talk about safety

Many substances can reduce inhibitions and impair decision making. Talk with your teen about vulnerabilities with unsafe people and places. Is there supervision? Do they know and trust people they will be with? What are the risks if they are impaired?



Offer to be a safe non-judgmental ride home

Tell your teen you don't want them to drive or get in a vehicle with someone under the influence of alcohol or other drugs. Encourage them to plan ahead - offer to be a safe ride home with no judgement or punishment.



What you are already doing is working

Family connection is one the biggest protective factors. Checking in with your teens about their day, helping them through their stressors, celebrating their successes, doing activities as a family - these seemingly small things make a big difference.



Nicotine

Cigarettes, Vaping,
and Nicotine Pouches



❖ How Nicotine Tricks the Adolescent Brain

Nicotine releases dopamine in the brain, creating a brief feeling of pleasure and well-being. It helps relieve stress, pain, and can improve mood. As a stimulant, nicotine also raises heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing. However, these effects are short-lived, and as nicotine levels drop, feelings of anxiety and stress return. To relieve these feelings, the brain craves more nicotine, prompting the person to want another dose. This cycle leads the brain to associate nicotine with survival. Over time, the person feels an increasing need for nicotine. This is how addiction develops. Teens are particularly at risk because their developing brains are more sensitive to nicotine and dopamine.

❖ What you can do:

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- Teach kids all the facts about nicotine use.
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- Reduce the influence of marketing with healthy technology boundaries.
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- Pay attention to your child's mental health. Teens often say they use nicotine to manage stress, anxiety, and depression symptoms.
-
- Connect kids to activities that makes them feel good (like exercise and social activities).
-

❖ 3 Reasons Why Vaping Isn't Harmless

Vaping is a popular alternative to smoking for consuming nicotine. Despite appearing less harmful, vapes are not safe products. Here are some reasons why:



01 Nicotine is addictive and causes changes in the developing brain

The most common form of nicotine found in vapes, nicotine salts, is more addictive and may lead to smoking. Nicotine changes the attention, learning, and memory areas of the brain and can affect impulsivity and mood. It also causes the heart to beat faster and activate a “fight or flight” response in the body.



02 Vaping contains chemicals that can be harmful

When scientists analysed what is in vaping liquids and the “cloud” that comes out of the device, they detected heavy metals and toxic chemicals.



03 Vaping affects the heart and lungs


It can irritate the airways and lungs and increases the risks of cardiovascular diseases. We are still learning about the long-term effects of vaping.

❖ What you can do

- Help your child learn about the risks associated with vaping. Check out [this teen page](#) for all the basics.
- Help your teen find ways to navigate peer influence. You can start by watching this [3-minute video](#) together.
- If your teen already uses a vaping product, talk with them about quitting. Free support is available through [QuitNow](#) and [Foundry BC](#).
- If they are not ready to quit, you can explore ways of [reducing the risks of vaping](#).



The New “Nic” on the Block: Pouches

 Nicotine pouches are becoming more popular among teens in Canada. Packaged discreetly, the pillow-like pouches contain nicotine and flavoring. It is placed between the gum and inner lip which makes them easy to conceal. Teens may use nicotine pouches for the quick "buzz" or feeling of relaxation, while others may use them to enhance focus or athletic performance. Teens are drawn to these products because they're discreet, easy to use and don't involve smoke or vapor, making them seem less harmful. However, nicotine pouches still come with serious risks. They can lead to addiction and affect teens developing brain. Using nicotine also increases the chances of developing mental health issues like anxiety or depression.

Here are some things you can do:



Know the slang

Teens may refer to nicotine pouches as “zyns”, “nic/dip”, “lip pillows” or “upper/lower decky”. Slang evolves with time and varies among groups.



Encourage healthy habits

Help your teen manage stress and improve sports performance with good sleep, proper nutrition, and regular exercise.



Discuss ads influence

Nicotine pouches are marketed as tasty, cool and harmless, which makes them more tempting.



Talk about the risks

These 5 important facts can guide your conversation.



Cannabis

Flower, Edibles, Vaping,
and Other Products



❖ Clearing the Smoke on Cannabis

Cannabis may be legal, but that doesn't make it harmless. There's a lot of confusion about cannabis since legalization, and teens are often misled by online info or their peers. The truth? Cannabis can affect youth differently than adults — especially when it comes to learning, memory, and mental health. The adolescent brain is still forming important connections. When cannabis (especially high-THC products, which is the psychoactive component of cannabis) is used regularly, it can:



Interrupt memory and concentration



Make it harder to manage stress or emotions without substances



Reduce motivation and school performance



Increase the risk of developing anxiety, depression, and psychosis

❖ Cannabis Trends

1

High-Potency Products

Today's cannabis can have 2–3x more THC than past decades. That means stronger effects and more risks.

2

Edibles & Delayed Highs

Brownies, gummies and drinks can take 1–2 hours to kick in — often leading to overuse.

3

Vaped Cannabis

Cannabis vapes are often easier to hide, more potent, and harder to detect than joints.

❖ Practical tips



Connection is protection

Teens who feel heard and respected are more likely to come to you with questions, concerns, or when they're in a tough spot.

Stay curious, not critical

Instead of just telling them what to do, listen to how your teen is thinking and making their decisions. Give them credit for making good choices – even the imperfect ones.



Talk, don't lecture

Instead of...

"You better not be using weed."

Try...

"You're probably hearing a lot about cannabis at school. I'd love to hear what you think — and share what I know, too."

Bonus Tip: Check this [guideline on how to reduce risks when using cannabis](#) to navigate the conversation



Alcohol

Beer, Spirits, Ciders,
and Wine



❖ Why Alcohol and Teen Brains Don't Mix

Alcohol might seem like a 'normal' part of growing up, but for young people, it comes with real risks. The adolescent brain is still developing, especially in areas that control judgment, impulse, and decision-making — and alcohol can interfere with all of these.

Binge drinking increases the risk of harming themselves or others.
Some of the risks associated with alcohol include:

Car accidents

Youth are the largest group of drivers who die in crashes and test positive for alcohol or other drugs. Almost 45% of fatally injured drivers aged 16 – 19 tested positive for alcohol or other drugs.

Serious injuries

Youth have the highest injury rate among any other age group. Alcohol decreases coordination and impairs motor skills, leading to a greater risk of injury.

Alcohol poisoning

Drinking too much alcohol too quickly can overwhelm the liver, leading to alcohol poisoning. This can lead to choking, slowed breathing, unconsciousness, or even death.

Risky sexual behaviour

Alcohol impairs judgment and increases the risk of unsafe sex, STIs, unplanned pregnancy, and involvement in aggressive or unwanted sexual situations.

Combine other substances

Combining alcohol with other substances, including caffeine - like energy drinks - can increase the likelihood of experiencing adverse physical, psychological and personal outcomes.



Did you know alcohol is the #1 drug used by teens?

❖ Risks for the future

Alcohol is harmful to everyone's health, regardless of age or the kind of alcohol, including increasing the risk of cancer and other diseases. Drinking as a young person has some added risks that you and your teen should consider.

Alcohol can affect the brain's wiring — particularly the parts responsible for planning, learning, and emotional regulation. Even occasional binge drinking can have long-term impacts on brain health and personal safety. Young people who start drinking early are more likely to:



Engage in risky behaviours (like impaired driving or unsafe sex)



Develop a dependence on alcohol later in life



Struggle with mental health and memory issues

❖ What you can do

- Encourage your teen to avoid or delay using alcohol.
- Talk with your teen about ways to stay safer around alcohol. These tips are useful whether they choose to drink now, later, or not at all. Check the [Canada's Guidance on Alcohol for Youth](#), to learn how to reduce harmful drinking.
- If you consume alcohol, model safer drinking practices when possible, such as pacing yourself, eating and drinking water and reducing the amount that you consume.
- Help your teen make a plan to get home safely if they are going to be around alcohol, and let them know you're always an option.
- Teach your child how to [recognize the signs of alcohol poisoning](#) so they can help others if needed.





Can you imagine if teens just got in a car and had to figure out how to drive safely without any instructions? Seems crazy but many teens learn about alcohol and other drugs through trial and error. This is because most adults don't talk with teens about how to be safe if they are using. We have tips to help you do that.

Lessons for Life

Eat and stay hydrated

One of the first lessons many of us learn to reduce the impact of a night out is ensuring that we have eaten first, and stay hydrated.

Transportation

Tell your teen you don't want them to drive or get in a vehicle with someone under the influence of alcohol or other drugs. Encourage them to plan ahead - offer to be a safe ride home with no judgement or punishment.

Know where you go

Teens may end up partying in rural remote settings- know where they will be, get them to plan for not having cell service, and should something happen they need to be able to tell 911 dispatch where they are.

Setting limits involves knowing what and how much we are consuming

Talk about standard drink measures, for instance did you know SOLO brand cups have measure lines on them? This along with awareness of the strength of alcohol we might be consuming can help us in monitoring consumption.

Safety in numbers

Alcohol and other drugs change how we think and act, thinking about who we want to be around when under the influence, and that is the case for us and the other people we are with. Helping youth to choose to be around people they trust, and when necessary taking care of their friends.

Substances should not be the only tool in the toolbox

Lots of us use substances to celebrate, to socialize, and to relax but when we come to rely on them to feel good, help us sleep, or to deal with anxiety, that's when problems can occur. Support your teen to develop other ways to manage these experiences so they have more tools in their toolbox.



Resources

Learn more and
access support

Nicotine

- [Tobacco & Vaping Information | IH](#)
- [How to Talk to your child about vaping | Canadian Lung Association](#)
- [Let's Talk About Vaping | Not an Experiment, Health Canada](#)
- [Vaping FAQ | CAMH](#)
- [Canada's Lower-Risk Nicotine Use Guidelines \(2025\) - CAMH](#)
- [Vaping Harm Reduction Tips | CAMH](#)

Cannabis

- [Cannabis Information | IH](#)
- [Talk about Cannabis | Health Canada](#)
- [Lower Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines for Youth, by Youth | UVIC](#)
- [Lower-Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines for Youth | CAMH](#)

Alcohol

- [Alcohol Information | IH](#)
- [Conversations Matter: Alcohol | CAMH](#)
- [Drinking Less is Better \(youth Version\) | CCSA](#)

Substance Use & Parenting

- [Talking with Teens about Alcohol and other Drugs | IH](#)
- [Parents Like Us - Written by parents for parents | Foundry BC](#)
- [Let's Talk - Information Toolkit for Caring Adults | Island Health](#)
- [Talking to Youth - Overdose awareness | Government of BC](#)
- [Substance Use & Youth | Kelty Mental Health, BC Children's Hospital](#)

Services & Support

- [Youth Substance Use Services | IH](#)
- [Mental Health Services for Children & Youth | IH](#)
- [Community Services Directory | Pathways BC](#)
- [Foundry BC: Integrated Services for Youth \(virtual, in-person\)](#)
- [Toward the Heart \(Harm reduction\) | BCCDC](#)

Empowered Parents

Navigating conversations about drugs and
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Legal Substances and Youth Harm Reduction
IH Population Health (2025)
www.interiorhealth.ca