



PRESS RELEASE

For immediate release

Major need for Northern Ontario families to improve safe handling and disposal of medications at home

Survey shows a gap between understanding of the harmful effects of accessible medications at home, and action to prevent it

OTTAWA, September 20, 2023 – A comparative study of five Canadian provinces reveals that, while most parents say their children can access their medications (including stimulants, sedatives, opioids, and over-the-counter medications), less than half report keeping these medications locked away safely. Use of medications to get high remains a priority issue in the healthcare sector; regions in Northern Ontario including Sudbury, Timmins and Thunder Bay may find this especially concerning as they report higher rates of mortality and emergency room visits caused by substance misuse than most other areas in Ontario.

In partnership with the Angus Reid Group, Health Product Stewardship Association (HPSA) and Drug Free Kids Canada (DFK) conducted a study in select provinces (BC, MB, ON, PEI and QC) to understand parents' medication handling and disposal practices, as well as the extent to which they have taught safe medication practices to their children.

The study found that most parents (85%) report not keeping their medications locked away from children on a regular basis. Meanwhile, 70% report that their children can access their parents' medications, including both prescription and over-the-counter medications. Despite knowing their children have this access, nearly half (48%) of parents also reported they had never spoken with their kids about safe disposal of unwanted medications.

The DFK-HPSA study also found that three quarters of parents in Ontario report returning unused medications through take-back programs or initiatives at their local pharmacies. However, 40% also report throwing them in the garbage, which represents an environmental and health hazard.

Use of medications to get high by youth in Canada is an ongoing concern. Teenagers and young adults in high school, college or university report substance use for non-medical purposes (i.e.: to get high). Among teens, 7.4% report using opioids, 4-6% report using various over the counter medications, 5% report using stimulants and 2% report using sedatives.¹

¹ Health Canada 2023. Canadian Student Tobacco, Alcohol and Drugs Survey. 2021-2022



These rates are often higher among post-secondary age youth; 35.6% report using pharmaceutical products to get high.²

Use of medications without a prescription and medical supervision can result in a trip to the emergency department (ED) and even death.

Between 2020-2022, Porcupine Health Unit, Public Health Sudbury & Districts and Thunder Bay District Health Unit each reported higher rates of substance related deaths & ED visits for stimulants, sedatives and opioids than most other health units in Ontario. All three regions were among the top ten highest rates of mortality caused by benzodiazepine use in 2021, as well as placing among the top five regions reporting highest rates of mortality from stimulants in 2022. Each region also placed among the top ten highest rates of ED visits for opioid-related harms in 2022 for youth ages 15-24.³

As we move into the back-to-school season, DFK reminds parents to store medications out of reach of children and dispose of them safely by returning unused or expired products to their local pharmacies. Doing so is a healthy step in promoting safe communities and supporting a child's success as they get back into classrooms and programs across Ontario and Canada.

About Drug Free Kids Canada

Drug Free Kids (DFK) Canada is a national non-profit organization that creates and disseminates evidence-based drug prevention education to families to prevent and reduce the harms of problematic use by youth. DFK raises awareness about substance use issues, and provides parents with information, valuable tools and practical tips that encourage and facilitate meaningful conversations with their kids.

Methodology

n=2,020 parents of children aged 11-19 in BC, Manitoba, Ontario, PEI and Quebec (1,015 in 2022, 1005 in 2023). All parents were members of the online Angus Reid Forum. For comparison purposes only, the parent sample would yield a margin of error of +/- 3.1 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. The survey was conducted in both English and French.

For more information:

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² Health Canada, 2021. Canadian Post-Secondary Education Alcohol and Drugs Survey 2020-2021

³ Public Health Ontario, 2023 Substance Use Data