

# Substances At A Glance: Alcohol

*Alcohol is the most used psychoactive substance by all ages in Canada, and youth first try alcohol at age 13.<sup>1</sup>*



**What is alcohol?** Alcohol is a legal substance known for its psychoactive properties. Pure ethanol is clear and colourless liquid that is present at varying percentages in alcoholic beverages such as beer and wine (usually between 5-14%) or spirits (which can be 40% or more). Alcoholic beverages get their distinctive colours from their ingredients and from the process of fermentation.



**Alcohol use among youth:** In Canada, 40% of youth in grades 7-12 report drinking alcohol in the past 12 months.<sup>1</sup> That number increases to 84% (around 5 in 6) of post-secondary age students.<sup>2</sup> 1 in 5 high school aged youth consumes 5 or more drinks per occasion, which increases the risk of harms and alcohol dependence.<sup>1</sup>



**Why do youth use alcohol?** Young people may drink to relax or have fun. They may feel a need to fit in, to be like their friends or older siblings, or because they see it happening all around them, on social media or at parties. Some may be copying a parent's drinking habits, while others use alcohol to deal with stress and anxiety in their life.



**Alcohol and the law:** Purchase, sale and possession of alcohol is legal for Canadians age 19+ (except Alberta, Manitoba and Quebec, where the legal age is 18). Underage youth who are found drinking alcohol in Canada can face fines or have their alcohol taken by police. Youth who are caught trying to use a fake ID can also be banned from accessing the business where they are caught doing so.



**Alcohol and driving:** Alcohol impairs depth perception, judgment, reaction time, balance and vision, increasing the risk of being involved in or causing dangerous or fatal collisions. Impaired driving in Canada has been illegal since 1921, yet police reported 57,795 cases of alcohol-impaired driving in 2020. Consequences for driving impaired can include fines, insurance increases, a criminal record and possible jail time.<sup>3</sup>



**Get more information about alcohol  
on our website:**



# Substances At A Glance: Alcohol

*In 2020, alcohol-related harms cost a combined \$13.47 billion to the Canadian economy between healthcare, criminal justice and long & short-term disability costs, a total higher than any other substance.<sup>4</sup>*



**What does alcohol impairment feel like?** For many people, a single drink of alcohol can ease tension and reduce inhibition, making them feel more relaxed and outgoing. On the other hand, others may become depressed or hostile. Early signs of alcohol use are flushed skin, impaired judgment or reduced inhibition. Continued drinking can also cause impaired attention, delayed reflexes, slurred vision, dizziness, nausea, vomiting and in some cases, death.



**What are the risks of alcohol use?** Alcohol can contribute to over 200 health risks, both short and long term.<sup>5</sup> Short-term risks include alcohol poisoning, which can cause stupor, coma and difficulty or inability to breathe. Long term alcohol use is attributed to various cancers, high blood pressure, anxiety, depression and organ damage. Drinking before driving can be dangerous or fatal, and drinking while pregnant can cause significant health risks to an unborn baby.



**How can someone reduce the risks of alcohol use?** If someone is thinking about using alcohol, they should set low limits for use and stick to them. They should eat before and while drinking, set aside time to do alcohol-free activities and drink lots of water to stay hydrated. They should also designate a driver if they plan to travel, avoid mixing alcohol with other drugs and avoid use altogether if they are pregnant or have a history of substance use issues.



**How can I help my kids understand alcohol use?** Being informed about alcohol and its effects on youth can help you to initiate early, open and honest conversations together. Help them plan all travel with a sober driver and be willing to help them if they find themselves in an unsafe situation related to alcohol. Listen to them when they ask questions or share experiences, and work to establish trust and open communication.



**Looking for more information on Alcohol and some helpful suggestions on how to begin these important conversations with your child? Download the [DFK Youth and Alcohol PDF](#).**

## Reference List

1. Health Canada, 2023. [Canadian Student Tobacco, Alcohol, and Drugs Survey 2021-2022](#).
2. Health Canada, 2021. [Canadian Post-Secondary Alcohol and Drugs Survey 2019-2020](#)
3. Public Safety Canada, 2022. [Annual National Data Report to Inform Trends and Patterns in Drug- Impaired Driving 2021](#).
4. Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction, 2023. [Canadian Substance Use Costs and Harms](#).
5. Government of Canada, 2021. [Government of Canada support first national guideline on high-risk drinking and alcohol use disorder](#).