

How many is too many?

New report looks at harmful alcohol use among youth in schools

Although the legal drinking age in BC is 19, 45% of youth who completed the 2013 BC Adolescent Health Survey had tried alcohol.

McCreary Centre Society released a report today looking at how many of these youth are drinking at harmful levels or in harmful ways (such as binge drinking).

The study shows that youth are generally making healthier choices than their peers five and ten years ago, with fewer trying alcohol, drinking recently or drinking heavily. They are also more likely to wait until they are at least 15 years old to drink.

Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines recommend that if youth under 19 are going to drink alcohol they should never have more than one to two drinks and never drink more than once or twice a week. However, for outcomes such as ratings of overall health and mental health even drinking within these Guidelines was associated with a less positive health picture than was seen among youth who drank on fewer occasions.

Despite recommendations that females consume fewer alcoholic drinks than males, older female youth drank at a similar level to older males, and younger females were more likely than younger males to have been drinking regularly and heavily in the past month.

Annie Smith, Executive Director of McCreary said of the findings: *"It is worrying to see the pattern of girls drinking. We have seen girls reporting poorer mental health than boys in a number of our studies and the data again shows that girls are more likely than boys to report drinking because they feel sad or stressed. Hopefully we can use this information to start a conversation with girls about healthier ways to manage these emotions."*

Among youth who had tried alcohol, those who felt connected to school, family and community and had supportive adults in their lives were less likely to drink at harmful levels than those without these supports to rely on.

Relationships with peers were complex as youth without any close friends and those with a wider circle of friends were more likely to engage in risky drinking than their peers with a smaller circle of friends. However, regardless of how many friends they had, if youth had friends with healthy attitudes towards alcohol use they were less likely to drink at harmful levels.



McCreary Centre Society is a non-government, non-profit organization committed to improving the health of BC youth through research and community-based projects.

Founded in 1977, the Society sponsors and promotes a wide range of activities and research to address unmet health needs of young people.

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BACKGROUND

The 2013 BC Adolescent Health Survey was completed by almost 30,000 youth aged 12-19 in 56 of the 59 BC school districts.

The survey provides decision makers and others with an interest in youth health with information on the health picture of young people in BC, as well as essential information about health trends, and about risk and protective factors that can influence young people's healthy transitions to adulthood.

The survey is designed to consider emerging youth health issues, and to track trends over time. It includes 130 questions asking youth about their perceptions of their physical and emotional health, risky behaviours and health promoting practices. It also asks about broader issues such as feelings of safety, relationships and engagement in a variety of activities.

This report was funded by the BC Ministry of Health. The Province has an online resource called Alcohol Sense which is available at <https://www.healthyfamiliesbc.ca>. It offers tools which parents can access to educate their children to make healthy decisions about alcohol through critical thinking and conversation. The site also promotes the importance of Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines.

A selection of key findings

Canada's Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines suggest that if youth do decide to drink they should never have more than one to two drinks per occasion and never drink more than one or two times per week. Many findings in the report offered support for these guidelines.

However, even youth who drank on three or more occasions in the past month reported poorer mental health than those who did not drink or drank less often, although the poorest outcomes were seen among those who drank on 10 or more occasions.

There were some concerning findings among youth who drank well above the recommended levels. For example, youth who engaged in heavy sessional drinking (meaning they had consumed five or more drinks within a couple of hours) were less likely to report good or excellent overall health, and were more likely to report being seriously injured and experiencing a concussion in the past year.

Youth who started drinking at an earlier age reported poorer health than those who had not tried alcohol or waited longer to first try alcohol. For example, 16- to 18-year-olds who first drank at 12 or younger were more likely to have considered or attempted suicide, used substances other than alcohol, and to have first had sex at an early age than those who had not used alcohol until they were at least 15.

Regardless of the age that they first drank, youth who had been drinking for more than a year were more likely than those who were newer to alcohol to report using it to manage their emotions, to have experienced negative consequences (such as passing out or getting into an accident), and to feel that they needed help for their use.

Males who had four or more alcoholic drinks and females who had three or more on the Saturday before taking the survey reported a range of negative consequences including lower ratings of overall health, mental health, and school connectedness.

There were some geographical differences in alcohol consumption, most notably that youth in rural parts of the province were more likely than their urban-based peers to have tried alcohol at an early age and to have drunk on three or more days in the past month.

Relationships at school, in their community and with family were all important in supporting youth who drank alcohol to stay within the Canadian Low Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines for less harmful use. For example, among 16- to 18-year-olds who had tried alcohol, 58% of youth who reported that their parents knew what they were doing with their free time had not tried alcohol until after their 15th birthday, compared to 33% of those whose parents did not know.

Similarly, males with an adult in their family they could turn to when they had a problem were less likely to binge drink last Saturday (28% vs. 35%), as were females (30% vs. 37%).

A copy of the report which is titled "*How many is too many for BC youth? Alcohol use and associated harms*" can be obtained at www.mcs.bc.ca. Webinar presentations of the findings are scheduled for November 23rd at noon and 3pm, November 24th at 8am, November 25th at 8am and November 30th at 11am. Details are available at www.mcs.bc.ca.