Alcohol Use and Well-Being in Teens
A guide for caregivers

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Although the legal drinking age in Canada is 18 years, many teens use alcohol at younger ages. It’s normal for parents and caregivers to worry about their teens using alcohol. By understanding why teens choose to drink and how this impacts their well-being, you can help support your teen in making healthy, informed choices surrounding alcohol.

Drinking patterns in teens

Underage drinking is quite common. On average, Canadian youth first try alcohol around 13 years old, and in Grade 10, 65% of students report having used alcohol in the past year.

### Quantity matters

If you drink in front of teens, follow household rules, consume moderate amounts, and don’t engage in risky behaviors such as drinking and driving.

### Factors that can impact teens’ alcohol use

Every teen makes different choices about alcohol use. A wide range of factors can influence their decisions.

#### Individual
- Older teens are more likely to use alcohol.
- Teenage boys may be slightly more likely to drink compared to girls, particularly bingeing. However, alcohol consumption in teenage girls has been on the rise in recent decades.

#### Family
- Teens are more likely to drink when parents express positive attitudes toward alcohol, or set fewer rules about alcohol.
- Stressful home environments (e.g., family conflict, financial struggles) may push teens to turn to alcohol.

#### Peers
- Sometimes, teens may drink more when they see partying portrayed as a normal, fun activity in music and on social media.
- Teens are frequently exposed to ads for alcohol, which can make drinking seem desirable.

### Not all alcohol use is created equal.
Understanding the level of risk associated with different drinking patterns can guide constructive conversations about alcohol use, and help caregivers know when to get outside help from professionals.

#### The spectrum of risk

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lower risk</th>
<th>Higher risk</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trying a drink once or twice, under adult supervision</td>
<td>Getting drunk several times a month, with slight impacts on daily activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinking daily or binging several times a week, with control in the way of health, school, and social relationships</td>
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#### Warning signs of alcohol use problems

- Frequently smelling of alcohol and appearing intoxicated, and having deteriorated hygiene
- Neglecting daily responsibilities or skipping school to use alcohol
- Talking about alcohol frequently, in a positive way
- Becoming angry, upset, or frustrated when access to alcohol is restricted

## Alcohol use and teens’ well-being

In Canada, one standard drink contains 13.5 grams of alcohol. Although teens drink less frequently than adults, they tend to consume more alcohol at a time.

Sometimes, this happens because teens don’t know exactly what’s in their drink.

#### Alcohol use and teens’ well-being

- Reduced attention span
- Impaired short- and long-term memory
- Lower organization skills
- More impulsive actions
- Learning difficulties
- Difficulties sleeping
- More risky behaviors (e.g., driving under the influence of and unprotected sex)
- Use of additional substances (e.g., cannabis)

#### Social

- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Increased conflict with loved ones
- More conflict in dating relationships

#### Emotional

- Heightened anxiety, depression, and loneliness
- Embarrassment or reduced self-esteem
- Mood swings and lowered emotional control

#### Behavioural

- Embarrassment or reduced self-esteem
- Mood swings and lower emotional control

### Alcohol use and mental health symptoms influence each other

#### Drinking can trigger or worsen mental health symptoms

Teens struggling with mental health symptoms may cope by using alcohol.

### Food for thought

Some examples of neutral, open-ended questions that help start the conversation on alcohol with teens:

- When I was your age, I didn’t know the amount of alcohol I different drinks. Have you learned about this before?
- Have you ever talked about drinking with your friends? How did those conversations make you feel?
- That movie we watched the other night showed some teens partying and drinking. What did you think that scene?