

alcohol and youth

supporting health and life



Why have alcohol guidelines for youth?

Since people younger than 19 years old are not permitted to buy or have alcohol in British Columbia, some might suggest the only guideline for youth should be, “Don’t drink.” But a high percentage of older youth in British Columbia are using alcohol on a regular basis – some in very risky ways. Low risk drinking guidelines acknowledge the evidence that alcohol can harm both physical and mental development, particularly in early adolescence but continuing well into early adulthood (at least to age 24). At the same time, the guidelines recognize that many young people do use alcohol and that there is good evidence to suggest that certain patterns of use are more risky than others.

What are the key factors that impact risk for youth?

The risk factors for developing problematic patterns of alcohol use are complex and simplistic accounts are not helpful. Nonetheless, the following are important considerations.

Regularly drinking alcohol (and in particular frequent intoxication) in early adolescence is associated with increased problems later in life.

Childhood trauma is associated with both early alcohol use and quicker progression from first drink to heavy drinking.

When young people believe alcohol is easy to get, they tend to use it more and to experience more problems.

What can parents or other adults do to support youth?

Promoting messages about lower risk drinking that teach young men and young women (and their role models) to drink alcohol in less risky ways when they choose to drink is important.

Clear rules are helpful, but good communication in which the younger person feels comfortable and well understood is more important than monitoring and surveillance.

A commitment to early childhood development that minimizes the likelihood of experiencing trauma and provides early supports is critical.

Canada’s Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines for youth

- From late teens to age 24, youth should never have more than 2 drinks a day (for females) or 3 drinks a day (for males)
- Teens should speak with their parents about drinking and never have more than 1 to 2 drinks at a time, and never more than 1 to 2 times per week

According to the Adolescent Health Survey

- Past month use of alcohol by school-aged youth in British Columbia declined from 43% in 1998 to 37% in 2008
- Heavy drinking episodes are still common – 24% of school-aged youth in British Columbia report having consumed five or more drinks within a two-hour period at least once in the past month

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