



Substance use has real risks. Plan ahead: know how to reduce your risks.

A toolkit for young adults

If you use substances, know the risks and make a plan.



Who this is for

Young adults who choose to use substances or be around others who do.



Why you should read it

Understanding the risks of substance use can help you reduce them.



Plan ahead and reduce your risk

Learn some simple things you can do or avoid doing.



How to lower your risk: cannabis, alcohol and opioids

Get information and ways to reduce the risks of use



Know the signs of an overdose or poisoning and what to do

Information and action that may help you save a life.



Learn some of the risks of combining substances

Combining substances can be extra risky. Learn why.



Get answers to FAQs

Have more questions? Check here or submit your own.



Think about your substance use

Check in with yourself using these thoughtful questions.

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How to reduce your risk

If you choose to drink alcohol, consume cannabis or other drugs, there are ways to help reduce the impact on your health and well-being.

All substances carry their own set of risks and potential harms, some unique to the substance. For example, cannabis poisoning in adults is not generally known to be fatal; however, using illegal drugs, like illegal opioids, is extremely risky and can lead to an overdose, and death. [Understanding what those risks](#) are will help you make informed decisions and safer choices.

Here are some tips and actions you can take to help to reduce some of the risks when consuming substances, but it’s important to remember that following these tips doesn’t eliminate the risk:

- ✔ **Eat food and drink water** before you consume drugs or alcohol, this can make the effects more gradual.
- ✔ **Pace yourself:** Start low and go slow.
- ✔ **Know your limits:** Think about setting a limit for yourself and be aware of how much you are drinking or taking.
- ✔ **Stick to one substance at a time:** Mixing substances can lead to higher-risk behaviours such as binge drinking, consuming more drugs than intended, losing control and harming yourself or others.
- ✔ **Have a charged phone** in case you need to contact friends, family or call for help.
- ✔ **Have a plan to stay somewhere safe or to safely get home:** Have a designated driver, call a friend or parent, or use a rideshare app or campus driving service.
- ✔ **Have friends around** or use the buddy system to make sure one of you can call for help in case of an emergency or overdose.
- ✔ If you are alone, **tell someone** you trust that you are consuming substances.
- ✔ **Talk to someone** you trust if you could use some support. Reducing or stopping substance use can be difficult to do on your own.
- ✔ **Avoid consuming substances every day or most days.** Frequent use can contribute to poorer physical and mental health, and dependency.

More you can learn

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HOW TO LOWER YOUR RISK:
CANNABIS, ALCOHOL
AND OPIOIDS



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Learn about drugs and
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Cannabis
Be informed >
Have a plan

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The higher the THC content ([the main chemical substance in cannabis](#)), the more likely [cannabis](#) is to harm your mental health (e.g., cause anxiety) and brain function (e.g., reduce memory or attention).



Cannabis vapes and infused pre-rolls as well as concentrates like shatter and wax, have the highest levels of THC and risk.



The risk to your health is greatest if you use cannabis every day or most days. Avoid using cannabis this frequently.



Everyone reacts to cannabis differently and your own experience can vary each time.



[Cannabis poisoning](#) (greening out) can be very unpleasant, dangerous, and result in a visit to the ER or hospitalization.



Unlike cannabis from legal sources, illegal cannabis is not tested and may contain harmful levels of THC or contaminants like mould, bacteria and even heavy metals.



Cannabis can interfere with brain development until around age 25. As a young adult, cannabis is more risky for your mental health and brain function.



[Learn how to recognize and respond to cannabis poisoning \(greening out\).](#)

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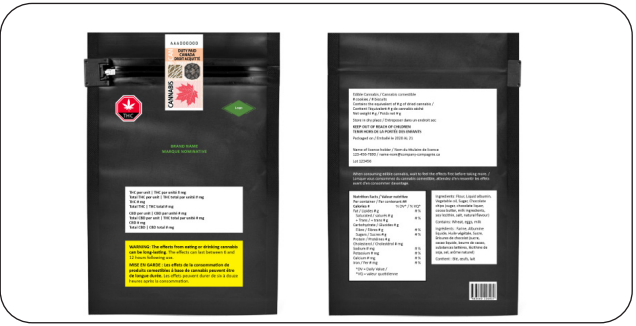
Start low and go slow. To avoid cannabis poisoning, start with a low amount of THC and don't take more too fast — it can take up to 4 hours to feel the full effects of cannabis edibles. For inhalations, wait a few minutes before taking more.



Avoid inhalable products. You are more likely to become dependent if you smoke or vape. Cannabis smoke contains many of the same harmful chemicals found in tobacco smoke. If you do smoke cannabis, avoid inhaling deeply, holding your breath, or similar inhalation practices because they can harm your lungs even more.



Choose legal cannabis. It is quality controlled and tested for harmful levels of contaminants and tested for accuracy of THC and CBD levels, so you know exactly what you're putting in your body.



Choose products with lower levels of THC. Any product with over 10% THC for smoking/vaping or 10mg of THC for edibles is high.



In severe cases, daily or near daily cannabis use can increase your chance of experiencing psychosis and schizophrenia. These cases are more likely among people with a personal or family history of mental illness, particularly male teenagers and young adults. Avoid cannabis if you have a personal or family history of mental illness such as psychosis, schizophrenia or substance use disorder.

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Drinking alcohol quickly can have an immediate effect, and it can lead to drinking too much.



Drinking too much can lead to alcohol poisoning which can have dangerous effects like respiratory arrest and death.



Sugary drinks can mask the taste of alcohol, but the alcohol will still affect you.



Mixing alcohol with caffeinated drinks can make you feel more alert, and you might drink more than intended.



[Learn how to recognize and respond to alcohol poisoning.](#)

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Pay attention to what you're drinking,
how much and how quickly.



Eat before you drink alcohol. An
empty stomach can make the effects
of alcohol more intense, while eating
foods high in protein and fat make the
effects more gradual.



Drink a glass of water between
each drink to stay hydrated and
help pace yourself.



Avoid leaving your drink unattended
and be mindful about accepting
drinks from others.

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An overdose can happen when a person knowingly or mistakenly takes too much of a drug, like an opioid, for example, if you:

- Use illegal drugs because the strength and type of the drug is unpredictable and unknown. Most overdose deaths in Canada involve illegally produced opioids.
- Use opioids other than as prescribed. For example, crushing or breaking tablets before taking them can release too much of the drug at once.
- Take prescription opioids more often or at higher doses than prescribed.
- Take opioids with alcohol or other drugs.
- Have a health condition.



When you take any illegal drugs, like counterfeit pills or cocaine, it's impossible to know what's in them or how strong they are which increases your risk of overdose and death, even if you use them just once.



[Learn how to recognize and respond to an opioid overdose.](#)



Illegal drugs found in Canada are being increasingly contaminated with strong opioids like fentanyl and other harmful substances. You can't see, taste or smell fentanyl, and a few grains can be enough to kill the average person.

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[Carry a naloxone kit with you.](#)



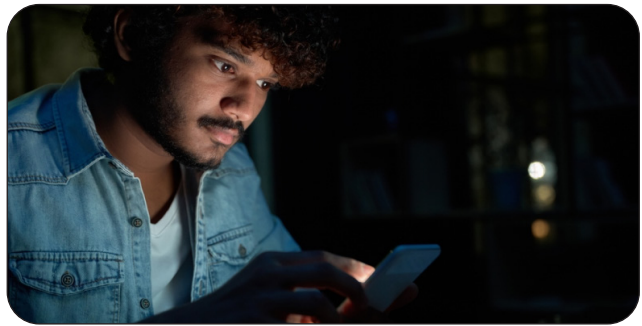
If you have stopped taking
opioids for a time and plan to
again, start at a low dose your
body will be able to handle.



Use [drug-checking services](#)
for illegal drugs to help detect
opioid presence or other
toxic substances.



Use in a safe place, with
sterile equipment. Dispose of
used equipment properly.



[Find an overdose prevention service](#),
like a hotline, app, or supervised
consumption site.



Avoid drinking alcohol while
consuming opioids and/or
any illegal drugs.



Eat food and drink water before,
during and after consuming drugs.

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OR POISONING AND WHAT TO DO



Learn to recognize an overdose or poisoning and how to respond

Get information on what to look for and what actions to take. It could save your life or help you save someone else’s.

The signs of
an overdose or
poisoning >

What to do
in case of
an overdose or
poisoning

Naloxone

The signs of an overdose or poisoning

If someone takes more substances than their body can handle, they will start to show signs and symptoms of an overdose or poisoning.

Cannabis poisoning (greening out)

Symptoms of cannabis poisoning can include:

- Nausea and vomiting
- Paranoia and hallucinations
- Severe anxiety and/or panic attacks
- Chest pain
- Rapid heartbeat
- Feeling faint and/or unconsciousness (can't be woken up)

Alcohol poisoning

A helpful way to remember the symptoms is the acronym [CUPS](#):

- Cold and sweaty skin
- Unconscious (can't be woken up)
- Puking (vomiting)
- Slow or irregular breathing and heart rate

Opioid overdose

Signs and symptoms of an opioid overdose can include:

- Difficulty walking, talking, or staying awake
- Blue or grey lips or nails
- Very small pupils
- Cold and clammy skin
- Dizziness and confusion
- Extreme drowsiness
- Choking, gurgling or snoring sounds
- Slow, weak or no breathing
- Inability to wake up, even when shaken or shouted at

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[What to do in case of an overdose or poisoning >](#)

Naloxone

What to do in case of an overdose or poisoning

Know the law can protect you

- If you have drugs on you when you ask or call for help, know that the [Good Samaritan Drug Overdose Act](#) provides some legal protection to anyone seeking emergency support during an overdose, including the person experiencing an overdose.

If someone is experiencing drug or alcohol poisoning, you should:

- Check in with the person by talking to them or gently shaking them
- Call for help (911 or your local emergency line)
- Make sure you stay with the person until the help arrives

An opioid overdose is always an emergency. If you see someone experiencing one:

- Call for help (911 or your local emergency line)
- Don’t wait, give naloxone right away (see how next)
- Stay with the person until the help arrives

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Naloxone

- Naloxone is a fast-acting medication used to temporarily reverse the effects of opioid overdoses.
- Naloxone is only effective for opioids such as fentanyl, heroin, morphine, and codeine
- It is safe for all ages and does not create dependence.
- It does not harm the person and it is safe to give to someone even if the person did not take an opioid.
- When you take an opioid, it affects certain receptors in your brain. Naloxone can kick opioids off the receptors in your brain and reverses or blocks the effects on your body.
- You can never be sure what substances are in illegal drugs. For example, a person may think they are using cocaine, but it could also contain fentanyl. Even if you are not sure about the drugs someone has taken, if they are experiencing symptoms of an opioid overdose, administer naloxone.

How to use it

- Naloxone is offered in 2 types of take-home kits:
- A nasal spray, sprayed directly into the nose, and
- As an injectable, injected into any muscle in the body, such as the arm or thigh.
- Naloxone only works temporarily. It is active in the body for 30 to 120 minutes, but most opioids last longer than this. This is why it is important to call 911 or your local emergency line in addition to using naloxone.
- Naloxone can be used safely again if a response to the first dose is not seen within 2-3 minutes.

Where to find Naloxone

- Most pharmacies provide take-home naloxone kits and a prescription is not needed.
- [Find information for your province.](#)

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LEARN SOME OF THE RISKS
OF COMBINING SUBSTANCES



Learn some of the risks of combining substances

Combining two or more substances is especially risky because the effects on the brain and body are unpredictable.

What can happen when you combine substances

In general, the risks to your physical and mental health increase significantly when you combine two or more substances as it can lead to severe intoxication, poisoning, drug overdose and, in some cases, death.

- Mixing substances can result in serious health problems including damage to the brain, heart and liver, seizures, heart attack, and stroke.
- Mixing substances can increase the risk of addiction.
- Alcohol increases THC absorption, so combining cannabis and alcohol can increase the risk of severe intoxication and impairment.
- Combining other substances with opioids complicates the effectiveness of naloxone, as naloxone only counteracts the effects of opioids.
- Mixing stimulants and depressants is dangerous because the results are unpredictable. The effects don't cancel each other out.
- Mixing alcohol and opioids significantly increases the risk of fatal overdose by suppressing the respiratory centers of the brain. You may stop breathing.
- Mixing prescription medications with other substances can be dangerous. Talk to a doctor or pharmacist about potential drug interactions.

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Find answers to some FAQs or ask one yourself

Do you still have questions about substance use and how you can reduce the risks? You can check here for answers.

What should I do if I see someone who looks like they are having an overdose, but I have also consumed or am carrying illegal substances?

Even if you've taken drugs or have some on you, the [Good Samaritan Drug Overdose Act](#) provides some legal protection. This includes simple drug possession charges.

The [Act](#) can protect you from:

- Charges for possession of a controlled substance (e.g., drugs)
- Breach of conditions regarding simple possession of controlled substances (i.e. drugs) in:
 - pre-trial release
 - probation orders
 - conditional sentences
 - parole

There are some exceptions to the act, including serious offences such as trafficking controlled substances. [Learn more.](#)

Is naloxone complicated to administer? And how do I get it?

Naloxone is simple to administer. In Canada, there are two types of kits available: A nasal spray and an injection. The nasal spray is sprayed directly into the nose and the injectable is injected into any muscle in the body, like an arm or thigh.

Watch these videos to learn more: [How to give naloxone spray](#) and [how to give a naloxone injection](#).

Naloxone can begin to take effect within 2 minutes. If a response to an initial dose is not seen within 2-3 minutes, subsequent doses can safely be given.

Naloxone only works if the person has opioids in their system. Even in doubt, always give naloxone. It is safe to give to someone even if the person did not take an opioid.

Naloxone kits are available at most pharmacies. [You do not need a prescription, simply ask your local pharmacist. You can also see where your province or territory offers them.](#)

What does an opioid overdose look like?

Signs and symptoms of an opioid overdose include:

- Difficulty walking, talking, or staying awake
- Blue or grey lips or nails
- Very small pupils
- Cold and clammy skin
- Dizziness and confusion
- Extreme drowsiness
- Choking, gurgling or snoring sounds
- Slow, weak or no breathing
- Inability to wake up, even when shaken or shouted at

Call for help right away and give [Naloxone](#) while you wait.

Naloxone only works if the person has opioids in their system. Even in doubt, always give naloxone. It has no side effects and it is safe to give to someone even if the person did not take an opioid.

Recognizing an overdose and carrying a naloxone kit on you, even if you don't consume opioids, can save a life.

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Do you still have questions about substance use and how you can reduce the risks? You can check here for answers.

What happens when you mix alcohol and cannabis together?

Alcohol may increase the amount of THC that is absorbed and that gets into the brain.

Combining the two can increase your risk of experiencing:

- More severe levels of intoxication and impairment
- Dizziness, nausea and vomiting
- Problems with memory, attention, and speech
- Anxiety and paranoia
- Poor sleep quality

Is it safe to start consuming cannabis at 18 or 19 years old when it is legal in my province?

Cannabis can interfere with brain development until around the age of 25. This puts you at an increased risk of harms related to mental health and brain function. At any age, it is important to know about all the [health effects of cannabis](#).

What is drug-induced psychosis?

Drug-induced psychosis can create symptoms that include delusions, hallucinations, disorganized thinking, mood swings, aggression, paranoia, severe anxiety, insomnia, and appetite changes.

Stimulants, hallucinogens, excessive alcohol, cannabis, and misuse of prescription medications can all trigger drug-induced psychosis.

Where can I find information on reducing the risks of stimulants, such as cocaine, methamphetamines, and ecstasy?

You can find information about several types of substances, including stimulants, on this page for [controlled and illegal drugs](#).

Many of the harm reduction measures in this toolkit can be applied to multiple substances, including:

- pacing yourself
- being aware of how much you are drinking or taking
- eating food and drinking water before and after consuming substances
- having a charged phone
- using the buddy system or telling someone you trust that you are consuming substances
- being aware of the risks of combining substances

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THINK ABOUT YOUR
SUBSTANCE USE



Take time to
think about your
relationship with
substance use

Our use of and feelings
about drugs and alcohol
can change over time.
It’s important to check in
with yourself every once
in a while.

Questions for self-reflection

It’s always a good idea to reflect on your relationship with drugs and alcohol. Here are some questions to get you started:

- ?

How often are you drinking alcohol or consuming drugs?
- ?

Are you consuming substances first thing when you wake up? Are you using them to get through the day?
- ?

Do you sometimes feel guilty or remorseful after drinking or consuming drugs? Is it creating any tension in your life?
- ?

Have you noticed a change in how much or how often you are using substances?
- ?

Have you felt unwell after consuming or the next day? Had nausea or a headache? Felt tired, anxious, or down?
- ?

Have you thought about making a change like reducing use or taking a break? What do you think is preventing you from doing that?
- ?

Have you thought about the reasons why you are drinking or consuming drugs? Is it to have fun? To relieve stress? To cope with difficulties you are facing? To fit in with others?
- ?

Have you felt the need to conceal or lie about how much you are consuming?
- ?

It’s also a good idea to talk to someone you trust about substance use. A friend, doctor, mental health professional, or an anonymous helpline. You can learn more in the [resources section](#).

Ways to incorporate self-reflection into your life

Here are some ideas for self-reflection:

- Keep a journal and write down how you feel after using substances.
- Create a “vision board” for the next year using images and words to describe your goals and intentions. Then consider your relationship with substance use and how it fits into your board.
- Write down some positive affirmations you can use to support or lift yourself up when you practice self-reflection.

- Check in with yourself before getting into a situation where you may consume substances. Is it right for you? If you decide you may consume substances, make sure you [know how to reduce your risks](#).

Benefits to reducing substance use

Your self-reflection may lead you to consider reducing substance use. If you choose to do so, there are some benefits that you may experience:

- Your overall physical and mental health and well-being may improve
- You may sleep better
- Your energy may increase

- It may help you save money
- Your relationships with friends and family may improve
- You may feel better able to accomplish what you need to
- By reducing or stopping cannabis use, you can reverse some of its effects and help improve your long-term mental health and brain function

If you find yourself ready to seek help, you can visit the [Get help with substance use page](#) for more information and available supports.

Plan ahead and
reduce your risk

Learn some simple things
you can do or avoid doing.

How to lower your
risk: cannabis,
alcohol and opioids

Get information and ways to
reduce the risks of use

Know the signs of an
overdose or poisoning
and what to do

Information and action that
may help you save a life.

Learn some of the
risks of combining
substances

Combining substances
can be extra risky.
Learn why.

Get answers to FAQs

Have more questions?
Check here or submit
your own.

Think about your
substance use

Check in with yourself
using these thoughtful
questions.

Access all
resources >

Get access to more information
you can trust and resources
that can help you.

Where to find even more information

Want to keep learning? Use these links to find helpful websites and fact sheets from trusted Government of Canada sources.

Cannabis: Use, effects and risks

[Learn more](#)

The health risks of drinking alcohol

[Learn more](#)

Naloxone: Save a life (fact sheet)

[Learn more](#)

Opioids: What Are They? (fact sheet)

[Learn more](#)

Opioid use disorder and treatment

[Learn more](#)

Get help with substance use

[Learn more](#)

Cannabis and mental health

[Learn more](#)

How young adults can reduce risks related to alcohol use

[Learn more](#)

About the Good Samaritan Drug Overdose Act

[Learn more](#)

Opioid overdose: Risks, signs and response

[Learn more](#)

More you can learn

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