



MEDIA RELEASE | March 2010

Youth who wait a year or two longer before trying alcohol or marijuana have better health, fewer problems, study shows

Youth in BC are waiting longer than a decade ago to try these substances

The McCreary Centre Society has released a new report which looks at alcohol and marijuana use among BC youth. Drawing on data provided by over 10,000 16 to 18 year olds who completed the McCreary Adolescent Health Survey, the study found that teens are waiting longer than a decade ago to first try alcohol or marijuana, but there are differences between those who start in their preteen years and those who wait until they are older.

According to the study, the most common age for youth to try alcohol was around 13 or 14 and it was 15 or older for marijuana. Youth who tried either of these substances at 12 or younger reported more negative health experiences than those who waited, such as injuries, unwanted sex and even suicide attempts. They were also more likely to drink and drive, get into fights and experience other risky behaviours.

“Delaying alcohol or marijuana use by even a year or two made a difference,” said Annie Smith, Executive Director of the McCreary Centre Society. “It’s important to understand who is at risk for earlier use, and what might help young people delay use, so that effective interventions can be developed even for those at greatest risk.”

Those who started drinking or using marijuana earlier were often young people who had already experienced life challenges, Smith noted, such as teens who have a health condition, those with a family history of suicide, and those who had been physically or sexually abused. Youth who waited until 15 or older to start drinking or using marijuana were more likely to feel cared about by their families and connected to school, to have friends with healthy attitudes about risk behaviours, and to feel that they were listened to and engaged in the activities they took part in.

Although youth who start using at very young ages had more problems, supporting them to stop using had clear benefits, Smith noted. “In our study, young people who had started using early but hadn’t used recently were healthier than their peers who continued to drink or use marijuana.”

The study findings also suggest missed opportunities for intervention. Youth who started drinking or using marijuana earlier than their peers were more likely to have asked for help from professionals, but less likely to find them helpful. They were also less likely to access health care when they needed it.

The McCreary Centre Society is a non-government, non-profit organization committed to improving the health of B.C. youth through research, education 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 McCreary Centre Society's BC Adolescent Health Survey was completed by over 29,000 youth in 1,760 classrooms across British Columbia between February and June of 2008. The survey provides the most comprehensive picture of the physical and emotional health of BC youth, including risk and protective factors. Previous surveys have been conducted in 1992, 1998 and 2003. The survey was administered by Public Health Nurses in 50 of BC's 59 school districts.

The survey is designed to consider emerging youth health issues, and to track trends over time. The majority of questions have been asked since 1992. The 2008 AHS included 147 questions asking youth about their perceptions of their current physical and emotional health, risky behaviours and health promoting practices. Healthy development for youth includes many contributing factors and the survey also asks about broader issues such as family connectedness, school safety and peer relationships.

This report uses data provided only by those youth who were aged 16 to 18 at the time they took the survey, because this allows us to assess the effect of early alcohol and marijuana use on later adolescence, and to compare early users with those youth who have never used or who have not used until later.

This report was commissioned by the Ministry of Healthy Living and Sport

Key Findings

- The use of alcohol and marijuana among BC youth aged 16 to 18 declined substantially over the past decade, but alcohol remains the most popular substance among youth in school. Seventy-five percent of 16 to 18 year olds had tried alcohol and 46% had tried marijuana.
- Male and female students were equally likely to have tried alcohol or marijuana, but males were more likely to have tried these substances at 12 or younger (24% of males vs. 17% of females).
- The older youth were when they started using alcohol, the less likely they were to engage in risky drinking behaviours such as binge drinking and mixing different types of alcohol (24% of early users vs. 7% of those who waited until 15 or older).
- Youth who used alcohol or marijuana at an early age were more likely to engage in a range of other health risk behaviours such as cigarette smoking (41% vs. 10%), using other substances and driving under the influence; 28% of those who first tried alcohol at age 12 or younger reported drinking and driving, compared to only 8% who waited until they were 15 or older.
- BC youth may be using marijuana to manage physical symptoms. Youth with a chronic health condition or disability were not only more likely to be early marijuana users but were also more likely to be current heavy users.

- Youth who had used alcohol at an early age but had not used recently reported lower rates of health risk behaviours (such as being current marijuana users) and higher rates of health promoting behaviours (such as seat belt use) than their peers who continued to use. Similar findings were reported for those early users who had not used marijuana recently.
- Youth with higher levels of protective factors, such as meaningful community engagement, family and school connectedness and friends with healthy attitudes about risky behaviours, were more likely to wait until they were at least 15 years old to try alcohol and marijuana than youth with lower levels of protective factors.
- Youth who had never tried alcohol or marijuana were less likely than those who had drunk at any age to report risk behaviours such as fighting, gambling and skipping school. Youth who had never tried marijuana also reported better emotional health than those who had tried it at any age.
- Delaying the use of alcohol and marijuana by even a couple of years improved health outcomes for youth. For example, youth who started drinking at 11 or 12 were less likely than those who started at 8 years or younger to have tried other drugs such as inhalants (11% vs. 21%) or crystal meth (6% vs. 15%) or injected drugs (2% vs. 13%). Youth who first started using marijuana at 11 or 12 were also less likely than those who first used at 8 or younger to self-harm (29% vs. 47%) or to consider suicide in the past year (19% vs. 31%).

The full report: *What a difference a year can make: Early alcohol and marijuana use among 16 to 18 year old BC students* can be downloaded at www.mcs.bc.ca

Webex presentations of the results will take place on 23rd March 2010 at 3pm and 25th March 2010 at 10am. To register contact duncan@mcs.bc.ca

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A bulletin about the use of substances other than alcohol and marijuana will be released on March 29th 2010.