

## Youth, Gender & Substance Use

Young people are more likely than adults to engage in substance use, use substances in hazardous ways, and experience harm as a result of their use.<sup>1</sup> Girls, boys and young people who identify as transgender or do not wish to be assigned a gender all face unique challenges when it comes to substance use, and effective research, prevention and treatment initiatives for youth need to consider both sex and gender related factors.

**Gender:** the socially constructed roles, behaviours, expressions and identities typically ascribed to binary notions of biological sex. Gender influences how people perceive themselves and each other, how they act and interact, and the distribution of power and resources in society.

**Substance Use:** The use of psychoactive substances, including alcohol, tobacco, and legal or illegal drugs, that change how individuals think, feel, and behave.

### Key Facts/Figures:

Substance use in young adulthood has been linked to a range of negative physical health, safety and social consequences, including accidental injuries, overdose, unprotected sex, poor school performance, family conflict, and interactions with police.<sup>2</sup> Early substance use is also associated with long-term health problems, including cardiovascular disease, cancer, cognitive problems, and dependence disorders in adulthood.<sup>3</sup>

National survey data indicate that young women and girls show similar, or in some cases, higher rates of drug and alcohol use compared to their male peers.<sup>4</sup> A Canadian study of past year drug use among grade 7-12 students in Ontario found that boys and girls reported similar levels of alcohol use (49%), binge drinking (21% and 18%, respectively), and non-medical use of prescription opioids (16% and 14%, respectively), although boys reported higher levels of cannabis use than girls (25% vs. 21%, respectively).<sup>5</sup> These comparable levels of use are of concern given sex differences in physical health impact of substance use. The same survey found that boys were significantly more likely than girls to meet the criteria for a drug use problem (19% vs. 14%, respectively), while girls were significantly more likely than boys to experience coexisting substance use and psychological problems (9% vs. 3%).



### Additional Resources

**Addressing the Needs of Women & Girls:  
Developing core competencies for mental  
health and substance use service providers**  
[https://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content/  
SMA11-4657/SMA11-4657.pdf](https://store.samhsa.gov/shin/content/SMA11-4657/SMA11-4657.pdf)

**Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre**  
[http://kelymentalhealth.ca/substance-use/  
addiction-substance-use-overview](http://kelymentalhealth.ca/substance-use/addiction-substance-use-overview)

**Providing Services and Supports for Youth  
who are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender,  
Questioning, Intersex or Two-Spirit**  
[http://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/  
lgbtqi2-s-practice-brief.pdf](http://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/lgbtqi2-s-practice-brief.pdf)

**Substance Abuse in Canada  
Youth in Focus:**  
[http://www.ccsa.ca/Resource%20Library/ccsa-  
011521-2007-e.pdf](http://www.ccsa.ca/Resource%20Library/ccsa-011521-2007-e.pdf)

Specific subgroups of youth appear to be at a higher risk for substance use and related problems, including homeless and street-involved youth, Indigenous youth, and LGBTQ youth.<sup>6</sup> For example, a recent meta-analysis found that the odds of substance use among lesbian, gay and bisexual youth were 190% higher than for heterosexual youth.<sup>7</sup> Greater risk for substance use among LGBTQ and other subpopulations of youth is linked to factors including elevated rates of violence and sexual abuse, stigma and discrimination, and trauma.<sup>6-7</sup> In this context, substance use/misuse may serve as a way to cope with distressing feelings, circumstances, or experiences.

Several common risk factors for substance misuse related to impulse control, family conflict, mental health concerns, and community factors like poverty and crime, may be relevant for both boys and girls.<sup>8</sup> Yet in many cases, boys and girls experience risk and protective factors differently. For instance, a national study of at-risk youth found that girls who received greater family supervision had less exposure to substances, and fewer opportunities for use compared to boys.<sup>2</sup>

Girls and boys also exhibit different motivations and contexts for substance use. Boys' reasons for substance use are tied to bonding with friends, relieving boredom, or enhancing their sense of self, while girls' reasons for substance use tend to center on coping with emotional problems, alleviating stress, or losing weight.<sup>2,9</sup> Gender differences in substance use and co-occurring problems have also been observed: for girls, co-occurring problems tend to reflect internalizing behaviours, like self-harm or eating disorders, while boys exhibit more externalizing problems, like violence or conduct issues.<sup>2</sup>

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## Implications for:

**Research:** Evidence on sex differences and gender influences for youth substance use is underdeveloped. Comprehensive sex and gender-based analysis in substance use research is needed, in order to enhance our understanding of girls and boys patterns and responses to substance use, and their corresponding prevention and treatment needs.

**Treatment:** Very few age-appropriate treatment services are available for youth in Canada, and female youth are underrepresented in treatment populations.<sup>10</sup> Treatment needs to be accessible and responsive to the unique mental health and social challenges faced by girls and boys – particularly for marginalized youth. Promising advances in the adult treatment system, including gender- and trauma-informed treatment models, should be explored for prevention and treatment services.

**Health Policy:** Policymakers, service providers, and health professionals need to account for the unique physical, emotional and social aspects of substance use for boys and girls. Instead of a one-size-fits-all approach, health promotion, prevention and harm reduction initiatives should be tailored to provide relevant and evidence-based information and supports.

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## References :

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