

DRUG USE

Among Ontario Students

1977- 2023

Findings from the Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey

SUMMARY
REPORT



camh

OSDUHS
Ontario Student Drug
Use and Health Survey

THE 2023 OSDUHS DRUG USE REPORT SUMMARY

The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health's *Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey* (OSDUHS) has been conducted every two years since 1977, making it the longest ongoing school survey of adolescents in Canada, and one of the longest in the world. This report describes the 2023 results for use of alcohol, tobacco, vaping devices, cannabis, illicit drugs, prescription drugs, as well as changes over time. Also examined are harms related to drug use, and perceptions of risk and availability.

A total of 10,145 students in grades 7 to 12 in 848 classes in 235 schools in 46 school boards across Ontario participated in the 2023 cycle of the OSDUHS. All data are based on self-reports derived from anonymous questionnaires. The survey was administered in classrooms between November 2022 and June 2023.

Past Year Drug Use (%) for the Total Sample, by Sex,[†] and by Grade, 2023 OSDUHS (N=10,145)



	Total	Males	Females	G7	G8	G9	G10	G11	G12
Grades 7-12									
Alcohol	35.6	32.7	38.6 *	6.9	14.6	25.1	43.0	48.1	60.7 *
Prescription Opioid Pain Relievers (NM)	21.8	18.0	25.8 *	22.5	22.2	22.5	20.2	21.4	21.9
Cannabis	17.6	14.8	20.7 *	s	5.4	8.9	21.8	25.7	34.0 *
Vapes/Electronic Cigarettes	13.4	9.4	17.7 *	s	5.0	9.1	16.7	19.1	21.8 *
Cough/Cold Medication (NM)	9.6	10.4	8.7	13.4	13.6	8.6	9.2	7.9	6.8 *
Tobacco Cigarettes	3.2	3.0	3.5	s	s	1.4	2.8	6.1	6.5 *
Waterpipes (Hookahs)	2.1	2.3	1.9	s	s	s	2.9	3.4	3.0 *
ADHD Drugs (NM)	1.9	2.1	1.6	s	1.9	1.8	2.1	2.1	2.0
Smokeless (Chewing) Tobacco	1.7	2.3	0.9 *	s	s	s	s	s	2.9 *
Grades 9-12^{††}									
Mushrooms (Psilocybin) or Mescaline	3.4	3.8	3.0	--	--	1.3	3.4	3.6	5.1 *
Tranquillizers/Sedatives (NM)	1.7	1.2	2.1	--	--	1.6	1.5	s	1.8
Cocaine	1.0	1.1	0.8	--	--	s	s	s	0.8
LSD	0.9	1.1	0.7	--	--	s	s	s	1.0
Ecstasy (MDMA)	0.6	0.5	0.7	--	--	s	s	s	0.7
Any NM Use of a Prescription Drug	22.9	18.7	27.2 *	--	--	23.4	21.7	23.2	23.2
Any Drug Use	29.3	27.3	31.4 *	--	--	28.9	29.4	28.9	29.9

Notes: [†] refers to sex at birth; ^{††} not asked of 7th and 8th graders; * statistically significant sex or grade difference (p<.05), *not* controlling for other factors; N=total sample size; s=estimate suppressed due to unreliability; estimate for alcohol excludes "a sip"; estimates for tobacco cigarettes and vapes/electronic cigarettes exclude smoking a few puffs; NM=nonmedical use, without a doctor's prescription; "Any NM Use of a Prescription Drug" is a composite measure defined as past year nonmedical use of opioids, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) drugs, or tranquillizers/ sedatives; "Any Drug Use" is a composite measure defined as past year use of any one of 11 drugs (excludes alcohol, tobacco/nicotine, and cannabis); methamphetamine, heroin, and fentanyl are not shown due to suppressed estimates.

2023 Subgroup Differences in Drug Use



Differences in past year drug use according to sex,* grade, and four regions of the province are presented in the report.

- Among the individual drugs asked about in the 2023 survey, females are significantly more likely than males to use four drugs, as shown in the table below. Males are more likely to use smokeless (chewing) tobacco.

 Males are more likely to use	 Females are more likely to use
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smokeless Tobacco 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alcohol • Prescription Opioids (NM) • Cannabis • Vapes/E-cigarettes

NM=nonmedical use

- Past year use of several drugs significantly differs by grade, as shown in the table below. In general, the percentage reporting use in the past year increases with grade, peaking in grade 11 or 12. The one exception is the nonmedical use of cough/cold medication, which decreases with grade.

 Use increases with grade	 Use decreases with grade
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alcohol • Cannabis • Vapes/Electronic Cigarettes • Tobacco Cigarettes • Waterpipes (Hookahs) • Smokeless Tobacco • Mushrooms/Mescaline 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cough/Cold Medication (NM)

NM=nonmedical use

- The survey design divided the province into four regions: Greater Toronto Area; Northern Ontario (Parry Sound District, Nipissing District and farther north); Western Ontario (Dufferin County and farther west); and Eastern Ontario (Simcoe County and farther east). The significant regional differences in past year drug use are shown in the table below.

Use in region <i>below</i> provincial average	Use in region <i>above</i> provincial average
Greater Toronto Area	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alcohol • Vapes/E-cigarettes • Mushrooms/Mescaline 	
North	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alcohol • Vapes/E-cigarettes • Cough/Cold Medication (NM) • Mushrooms/Mescaline
West	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cough/Cold Medication (NM) 	
East	
<i>does not differ from the average</i>	

NM=nonmedical use

* refers to sex at birth

Trends in Past Year Drug Use

2023 vs. 2021

Among the total sample of students, two drugs showed an increase in past year use between the previous survey in 2021 and the 2023 survey.

- The nonmedical use of prescription opioid pain relievers (such as Percocet, Percodan, Tylenol #3, Demerol, Dilaudid, OxyNeo, codeine) significantly increased from 12.7% to 21.8%. The current level is also significantly higher than in 2019 (11.0%).
- The nonmedical use of over-the-counter cough or cold medication (used to “get high”) increased from 3.6% to 9.6%, returning to a similar level seen in 2019 (7.8%).

No other drug showed a significant change among the total sample between these two survey cycles.

	2021 past year use		2023 past year use
Prescription Opioids (NM)	12.7%	↑	21.8%
Cough/Cold Medication (NM)	3.6%	↑	9.6%

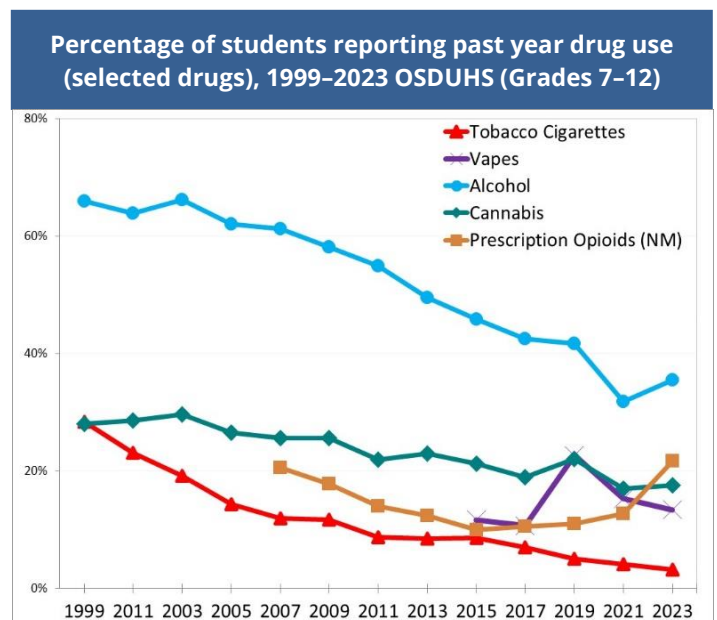
NM=nonmedical use

1999–2023

The study was redesigned in 1999 to include all grades between 7 and 12, making 1999 a key marker in the study’s history. In this section, we highlight significant changes between 1999 and 2023.

In general, most past year drug use measures show a significant downward trend during the period between 1999 and 2023:

- alcohol: from 66.0% to 35.6%
 - cannabis: from 28.0% to 17.6%
 - tobacco cigarettes: from 28.4% to 3.2%
 - waterpipes: from 9.7% (2013) to 2.1%
 - smokeless tobacco: from 4.6 (2011) to 1.7%
 - mushrooms:† from 17.1% to 3.4%
 - cocaine:† from 5.7% (2003) to 1.0%
 - ecstasy (MDMA):† from 7.9% (2001) to 0.6%
 - LSD:† from 8.8% to 0.9%
 - methamphetamine: from 6.3% to < 0.5%
 - heroin:† from 2.1% to < 0.5%.
- Abstaining from any drug use (including alcohol, tobacco/nicotine, and cannabis) significantly increased between 1999 and 2023, from 27.2% to 42.2%, among students in grades 7–12.



† among grades 9-12 only (not asked of grade 7 and 8 students)

Other drugs show differing patterns of past year use over time:

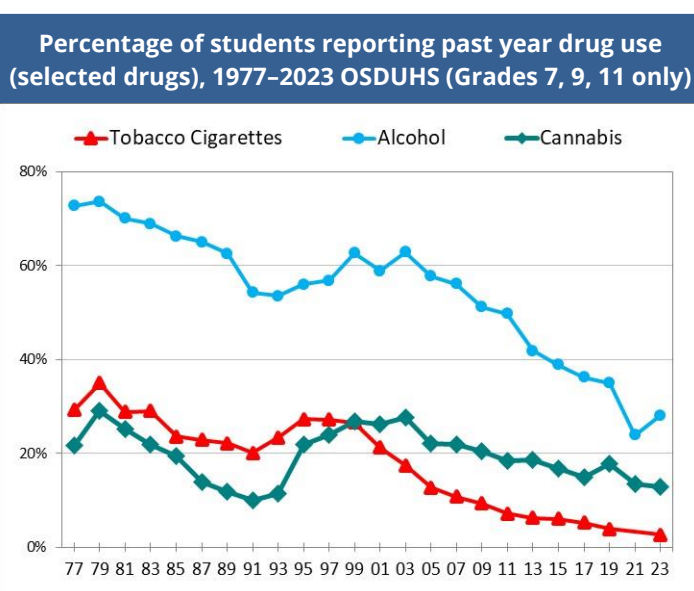
- The nonmedical use of prescription opioids shows a decrease between the late 2000s and 2021, followed by an increase in 2023, returning to a level seen when monitoring of these drugs first began in 2007.
- The nonmedical use of cough/cold medication shows a decrease between the late 2000s and 2021, followed by an increase in 2023, returning to a level seen about a decade ago.
- The use of vapes/electronic cigarettes significantly increased between 2015 (the first year of monitoring) and 2019, followed by a decrease since then.
- Drugs that remained low and relatively stable and show no dominant trend since their use was first monitored include ADHD drugs (e.g., Adderall, Ritalin, Concerta) and tranquilizers/sedatives (both nonmedical use).

A note about the 2021 OSDUHS

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Ontario schools were closed to in-person learning during the 2020-2021 school year. Therefore, the 2021 OSDUHS pivoted to online data collection. Students could complete the questionnaire outside of school hours rather than the typical method of completions in classrooms during school hours. This change in mode and setting led to a dramatically decreased student response rate for that cycle. Although the survey weights were adjusted to minimize any potential bias from non-response, the high level of non-response in the 2021 cycle likely had an impact on estimates. Readers should be cautious in interpreting the 2021 estimates as provincially representative.

Long-Term Trends in Drug Use, 1977–2023 (Grades 7, 9, and 11 only)

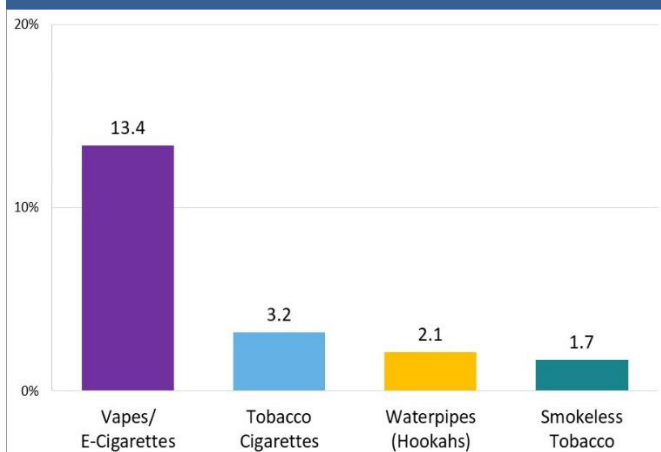
The OSDUHS has been monitoring student drug use for over 45 years. Many past year prevalence estimates for the 11 drugs monitored since 1977 show a common pattern of use: a peak in the late 1970s, a decline in the late 1980s or early 1990s, a second peak in the late 1990s or early 2000s, followed by another decline. Use of alcohol and tobacco cigarettes reached all-time lows in recent years.



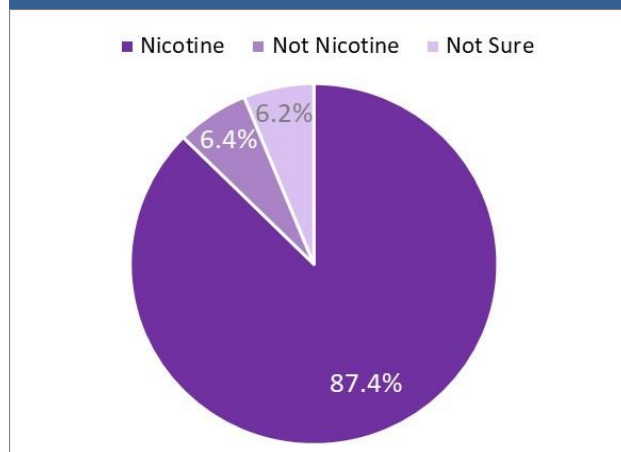
Tobacco Smoking and Vaping

- In 2023, about 3% of students in grades 7–12 report smoking tobacco cigarettes (more than just a few puffs) during the past year. Less than 1% smoke cigarettes daily. The past year prevalence of cigarette smoking shows a significant downward trend over the decades.
- Males (3%) and females (4%) are equally likely to smoke tobacco cigarettes. The prevalence of cigarette smoking significantly increases with grade, reaching 7% among 12th graders.
- About one-in-eight (13%) students in grades 7–12 report vaping (using an electronic cigarette) in the past year (more than just a few puffs). The past year prevalence of vaping increased between 2015 (first year of monitoring) and 2019, but has decreased since then.
- Among those who vaped in the past year in 2023, the majority (87%) report vaping nicotine.
- Females (18%) are twice as likely as males (9%) to report vaping in the past year. The prevalence of vaping significantly increases with grade, from 5% of 8th graders up to 22% of 12th graders.
- About one-in-nine (11%) students report vaping in the past month. More specifically, 4% report vaping once or twice, 3% report vaping one to six times a week, and 4% report vaping on a daily basis.
- About 2% of students in grades 7–12 report smoking more than just a few puffs from a waterpipe (hookah) in the past year. The 2023 estimate is the lowest since monitoring began in 2013.
- Smokeless tobacco (chewing tobacco, dipping tobacco, snuff) is used by about 2% of students in grades 7–12. The 2023 estimate is the lowest since monitoring began in 2011.
- Among those who smoke tobacco cigarettes, as well as among those who vape, friends are reported to be the most common source of these products.

Percentage of students reporting past year use of vapes/electronic cigarettes and tobacco-related products, 2023 OSDUHS

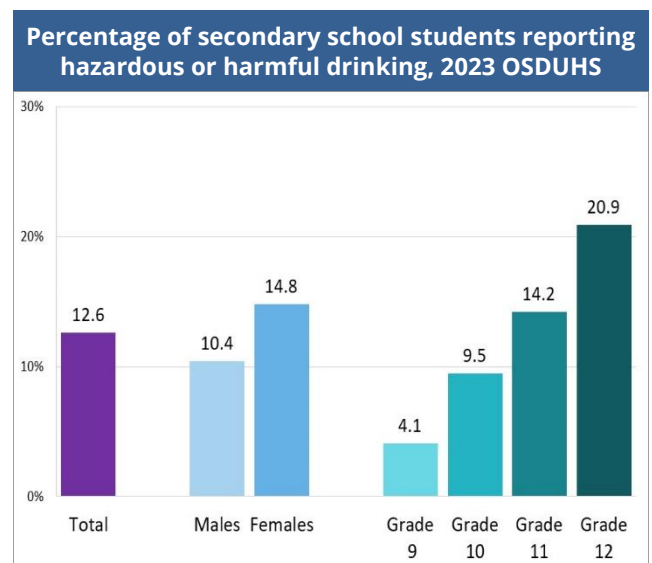
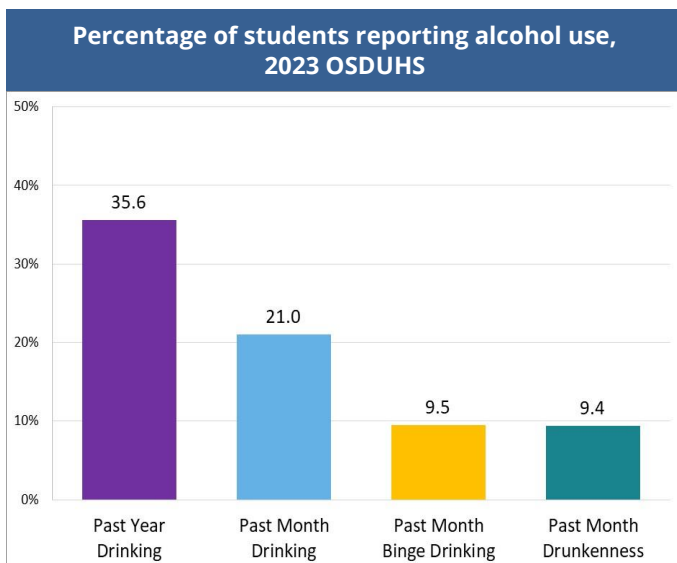


Percentage of students who vaped in the past year reporting vaping nicotine, 2023 OSDUHS



Alcohol

- In 2023, over one-third (36%) of students in grades 7–12 report drinking more than just a few sips of alcohol during the past year. The prevalence of drinking alcohol has decreased over the decades.
- Females (39%) are significantly more likely than males (33%) to drink alcohol. Past year drinking significantly varies by grade, increasing from 7% of 7th graders to 61% of 12th graders.
- About one-in-five (21%) students in grades 7–12 report drinking alcohol in the past month. About 5% drink on a weekly basis.
- One-in-ten (10%) students in grades 7–12 report binge drinking (defined as five or more drinks on one occasion) at least once in the past month. A similar percentage report becoming drunk at least once in the past month. Males and females are equally likely to report binge drinking and becoming drunk in the past month. About one-in-five 12th graders report these behaviours.
- Reports of binge drinking and becoming drunk have decreased over the decades.
- About one-in-eight (13%) secondary school students report drinking hazardously or harmfully, as measured by the *AUDIT* screener. Females (15%) are more likely than males (10%) to report hazardous or harmful drinking. There is grade variation, increasing from 4% of 9th graders up to 21% of 12th graders.
- One-in-seven (14%) secondary school students could not remember what had happened when they were drinking on at least one occasion during the past year.
- Among students who report drinking in the past year, the most common source of alcohol is a family member.



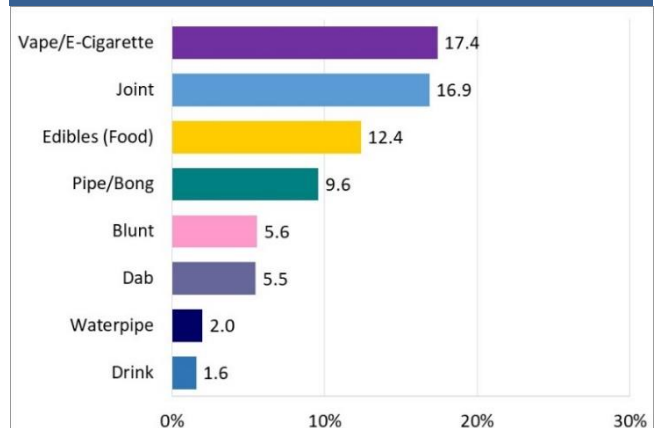
Cannabis

- In 2023, about one-in-six (18%) students in grades 7–12 report using cannabis in any way during the past year. While past year cannabis use did not significantly change since the previous survey in 2021 (17%), the current prevalence is lower than in 2019 as well as estimates seen two decades ago.
- Females (21%) are significantly more likely than males (15%) to report past year cannabis use. Prevalence increases with grade, from 5% of 8th graders up to 34% of 12th graders.
- About 11% of students report using cannabis in the past month. About 2% use cannabis daily. This estimate increases to 5% of 12th graders.
- About 11% of students used alcohol and cannabis on the same occasion at least once in the past year. This estimate increases to 24% of 12th graders.
- Among secondary school students (grades 9–12), the most common ways of using cannabis are vaping it (17%), smoking it in a joint (17%), and eating it in food products such as brownies or candy (12%).
- None of the modes of cannabis use measured among secondary school students significantly changed since the previous cycle in 2021. Vaping cannabis significantly increased since 2017, from 7% to 17%. Consuming cannabis edibles shows relative stability since 2017, when monitoring first began.
- About 4% of secondary school students report symptoms of cannabis dependence, as measured by the *Severity of Dependence Scale*. This estimate has been relatively stable since 2007, when monitoring first began.
- About one-in-nine (11%) secondary school students report using cannabis to cope with a mental health problem at least once during the past year. Females (15%) are significantly more likely than males (7%) to report doing so.
- Among students who used cannabis in the past year, the most common source of cannabis is friends.

Percentage of students reporting cannabis use, 2023 OSDUHS

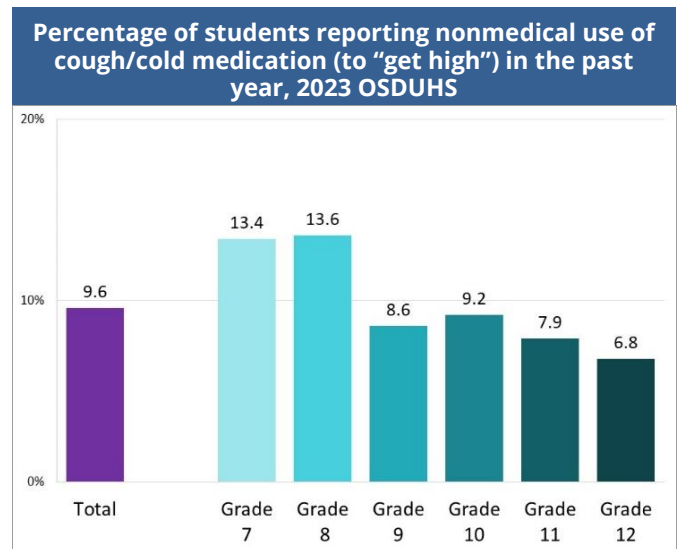


Percentage of secondary school students reporting cannabis use by specific modes (in the past year), 2023 OSDUHS



Nonmedical Use of Prescription Drugs and Over-the-Counter Drugs

- About one-in-five (22%) students in grades 7–12 report using a prescription opioid pain reliever (e.g., Percocet, Percodan, Tylenol #3, Demerol, Dilaudid, OxyNEO, codeine) without a prescription in the past year. Females (26%) are significantly more likely than males (18%) to report using these drugs nonmedically. Past year nonmedical opioid use significantly increased between 2021 (13%) and 2023 (22%), returning to an elevated level seen when monitoring first began in 2007.
- About 2% of students in grades 7–12 report using a drug typically used to treat Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in children (e.g., Adderall, Ritalin, Concerta, Dexedrine) without a prescription in the past year. Males and females are equally likely to use these drugs nonmedically. The nonmedical use of ADHD drugs has fluctuated since 2007, when monitoring first began, showing no dominant trend.
- About 2% of high school students (grades 9–12) report using a sedative/tranquillizer without a prescription in the past year. Males and females are equally likely to use these drugs nonmedically. Nonmedical use of these drugs has remained low and relatively stable for decades.
- One-in-ten (10%) students in grades 7–12 report using cough or cold medication to “get high” in the past year. Males and females are equally likely to use cough/cold medication to get high. Nonmedical use of these drugs significantly decreases with grade. Nonmedical use of these drugs significantly increased between 2021 (4%) and 2023 (10%), and is currently higher than in 2009, when monitoring first began.



Potential Harms Related to Alcohol and Other Drug Use

Vehicles

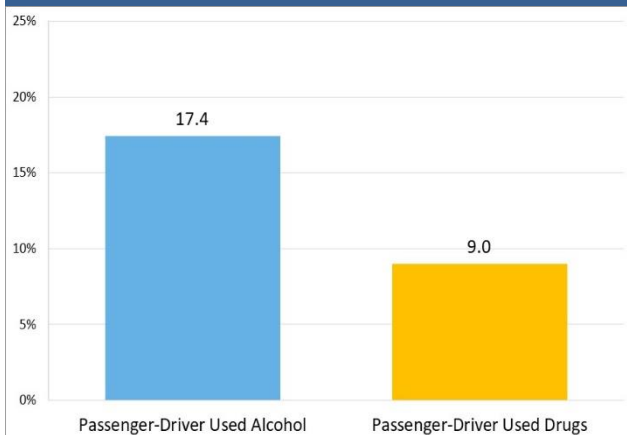
- One-in-six (17%) students in grades 7–12 report riding in a vehicle driven by someone who had been drinking alcohol, and one-in-eleven (9%) report riding in a vehicle driven by someone who had been using drugs at least once in the past year. The percentage of students reporting these behaviours has significantly decreased over the past two decades.
- About 6% of students in grades 10–12 with a G-Class driver's licence report driving a vehicle within an hour of consuming two or more drinks of alcohol at least once during the past year. Drinking and driving among adolescent drivers has been stable since 2013 at about 4%-7%. However, the current estimate is significantly lower than estimates seen in 1999 and the 2000s (12%-14%), and is substantially lower than estimates from the late 1970s and early 1980s (when almost half of 11th graders reported drinking and driving).

- A similar percentage (6%) of drivers in grades 10–12 report driving a vehicle within one hour of using cannabis at least once during the past year. Driving after cannabis use has significantly declined since 2001 (the first year of monitoring), when the estimate was about 20%, and has remained relatively stable since 2017.

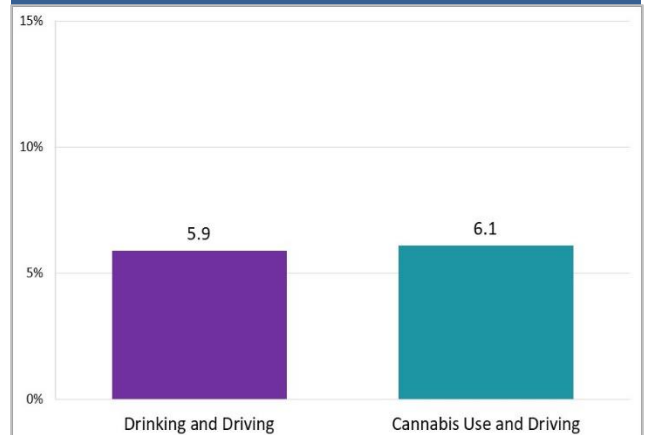
Drug Use Problem

- One-in-seven (14%) secondary school students report symptoms of a drug use problem (as measured by the *CRAFFT* screener), which may need further assessment. This percentage has been stable in recent years, but is currently lower than estimates seen two decades ago (about 22%).
- A very small proportion (1%) of secondary school students report that they had been in a treatment program during the past year because of their alcohol and/or drug use.

Percentage of students reporting being a passenger with a driver who used alcohol or drugs (past year), 2023 OSDUHS



Percentage of drivers in grades 10–12 reporting risky driving behaviours (past year), 2023 OSDUHS



Other Highlights

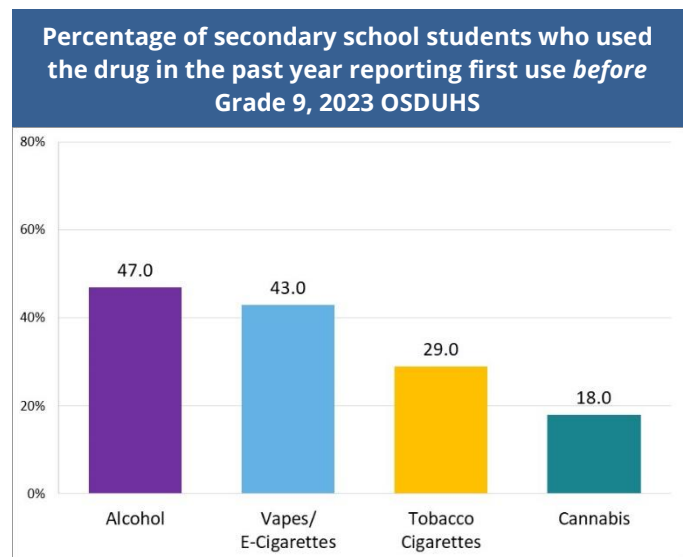
Abstinence

- About 42% of students in grades 7–12 report using no drug at all during the past year (this includes alcohol, cigarettes and other smoking devices). Males are more likely than females to abstain from drug use. Past year abstinence significantly decreases with grade, from under two-thirds of 7th graders down to one-quarter of 12th graders. There has been a significant increase in abstinence over the decades.

Early Initiation of Use

- About 43% of secondary school students who vaped in the past year report that they first started to vape before grade 9.
- Over one-quarter (29%) of secondary school students who smoked tobacco cigarettes in the past year report that they first started to smoke before grade 9.
- Almost half (47%) of secondary school students who drank alcohol in the past year report that they first started to drink before grade 9.
- About 18% of secondary school students who used cannabis in the past year report that they first started to use cannabis before grade 9.

- In 2023, the average age at which 12th-grade students who vaped in the past year report vaping for the first time was 14.3. The average age at which 12th-grade students who smoked tobacco cigarettes in the past year report smoking their first cigarette was 15.4. The average age at which 12th-grade students who drank alcohol in the past year report drinking for the first time was 14.5. The average age at which 12th-grade students who used cannabis in the past year report using cannabis for the first time was 15.7.
- Students today are initiating substance use at older ages than in the past, as the average age at first tobacco cigarette, first alcoholic drink, and first cannabis use has increased over the decades.

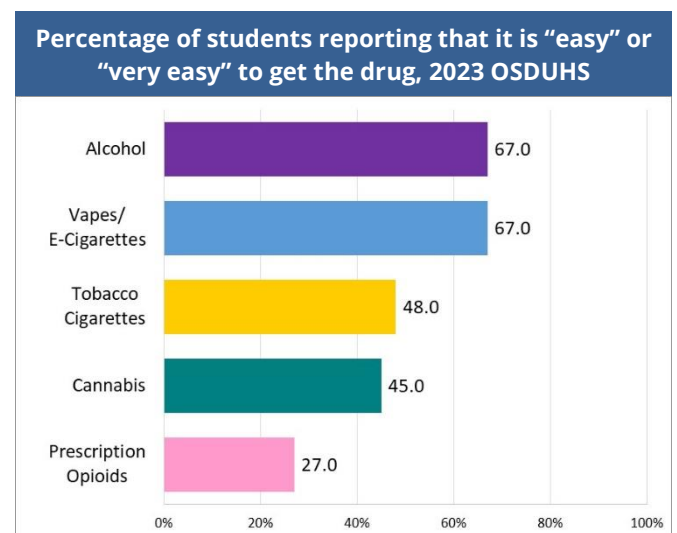
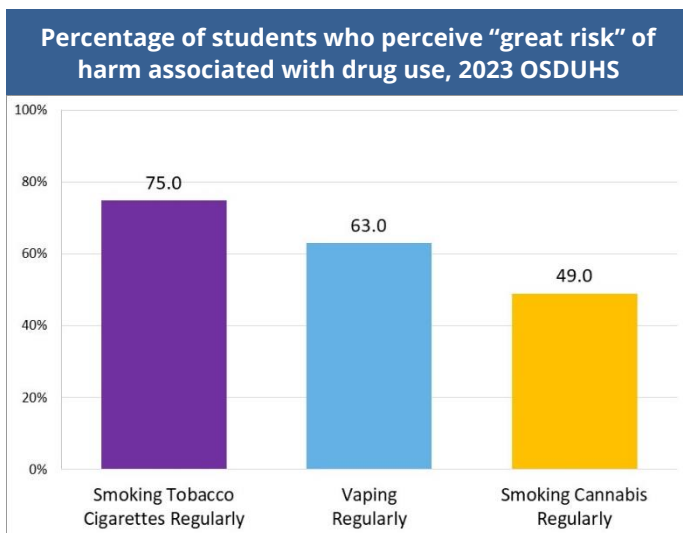


Perceived Risk of Drug Use

- Students were asked about the perceived risk of physical harm associated with smoking tobacco cigarettes regularly, vaping regularly, and smoking cannabis regularly. Of these, the greatest perceived risk is associated with smoking regularly (75%), followed by vaping regularly (63%), and smoking cannabis regularly (49%).
- The percentage of students who perceive a great risk of harm associated with smoking cannabis regularly was stable between 1999 and 2011, showed a decrease up until 2019, and has increased since then to a similar level seen two decades ago. The perceived risk of harm associated with vaping regularly has significantly increased since 2015, the first year of monitoring.

Perceived Availability of Drugs

- Of the drugs asked about, alcohol and vapes/e-cigarettes are perceived to be the most readily available to students (67% report that it would be “fairly easy” or “very easy” to obtain these), followed by tobacco cigarettes (48%), cannabis (45%), and prescription opioids, without one’s own prescription (27%).
- The perceived availability of vapes and prescription opioids significantly increased since the previous survey in 2021. The perceived availability of alcohol has increased in recent years, but is currently similar to the estimates seen two decades ago. The perceived availability of cannabis has been stable in recent years, but is currently lower than the estimates seen two decades ago. The perceived availability of tobacco cigarettes has decreased over the past two decades.



Methodology

The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health's *Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey* (OSDUHS) is an Ontario-wide health survey of elementary/middle school students in grades 7 and 8 and secondary school students in grades 9 through 12. This cross-sectional survey has been conducted every two years since 1977.

The 2023 survey cycle, which used a stratified (region by school level) two-stage (school, class) cluster design, was based on 10,145 students in grades 7 to 12 in 848 classes in 235 schools in 46 English and French public and Catholic school boards. Excluded from selection were schools in First Nation communities, on military bases, in hospitals and other institutions, and private schools. Special Education stand-alone classes and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes were excluded from selection.

Active parental consent procedures were used. Anonymous electronic or paper-and-pencil questionnaires were group administered in classrooms during regular school hours by staff from the Institute for Social Research, York University between November 2022 and June 2023. Data from the sample of 10,145 students were weighted to represent just under one million students in grades 7 to 12 enrolled in Ontario's publicly funded schools.

Please visit the OSDUHS webpage for reports, infographics, and FAQs:

www.camh.ca/osduhs