

The impact of COVID-19 on **Alcohol and Substance Use** in our community

COVID-19 is changing the way people use substances and is causing more substance-related harm



COVID-19 affects every single one of us

The COVID-19 pandemic has wide-reaching effects on all aspects of our work, family, and social lives. We all experience and cope with the COVID-19 pandemic in our own way. This Vital Focus series examines the impacts of measures to control COVID-19 on health and wellbeing in our community.



- **Individuals might be more likely to use alcohol and other substances** to cope with stressors, boredom, lack of a regular schedule, and isolation. ^{4.1, 4.2, 4.5}



- **Risk factors for family violence and child abuse (such as, substance use and social isolation) may increase due to the measures put in place to control COVID-19.** This could lead to or exacerbate difficult family situations that, without the buffer of a supportive adult, could cause toxic stress. Prolonged exposure to toxic stress can increase the risk for substance use later in life. ^{4.17, 4.18, 4.19, 4.20, 4.21}



- **More people may experience substance dependence.** Some people may find themselves using substances more frequently. People in recovery may find themselves starting to use substances again. ^{4.1, 4.2}



- **There may be more substance and alcohol related health harms.** People who use drugs report that it has become more difficult to access harm reduction services during COVID-19. ^{4.15} As more people use substances, and harm reduction is more difficult to practice, we will see more substance and alcohol related health harms in our community.



- **More people have died of overdoses.** More people are using alone due to physical distancing recommendations. The supply chain for the unregulated drug market has changed because of the pandemic. As a result, the toxicity and unpredictability of the drugs sold on it has increased. These factors increase a person's risk of experiencing an overdose. ^{4.1}



- **More individuals may seek treatment for addictions.** With more people using substances and greater contamination of illicit substances, we may experience an increase in demand for addiction treatment during and after the pandemic. ^{4.1}



- **People consuming alcohol or other substances may be more susceptible to COVID-19.** Alcohol and substance use can weaken the immune system and respiratory system, reducing the body's ability to fight off illness. This leaves people more vulnerable to infectious diseases like COVID-19. ^{4.3, 4.4, 4.15}

People use substances for many reasons

People use substances, including alcohol, cannabis, prescription, and illegal drugs for many reasons, including:

- to socialize;
- to cope with physical or mental illness or pain, strong emotions, social isolation, and or life hardships; and
- to avoid withdrawal symptoms.

People who have experienced adverse childhood experiences or childhood trauma, are also more likely to use substances later in life. ^{4.16}

Local and Canadian data show some of these effects

Research isn't available yet on all of the impacts of COVID-19 on substance use. However, two studies highlight initial findings from Canada and Guelph.



Increase in alcohol use in Canada

A poll conducted by the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction shows that some Canadians are consuming more alcohol than they did before the pandemic.

25% of Canadians aged 35–54 and 21% of Canadians aged 18–34 said they have increased the amount of alcohol they are drinking during the COVID-19 pandemic.^{4,5}



Increase in overdoses in Guelph

According to the FAST Overdose Alert System more substance-related overdoses have been reported in Guelph

Reports of substance-related **overdoses** between January and August, 2020 in Guelph increased by 7% compared to the same time period in 2019, from 195 to 208.^{4,6}

Reports of substance-related **overdose deaths** between January and August, 2020 in Guelph increased by 200% compared to the same time period in 2019, from 5 to 15.^{4,6}



Substance use can be harmful

Substance use can be harmful to people's physical and mental health. People who use substances may experience short- and long-term health effects, such as infections, injuries, chronic illnesses, or addictions. Substance use can also harm others. Violence, impaired driving, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, and crime are some of the second-hand impacts of substance use.

Substance use has a substantial impact on people and the economy, affecting the health system, productivity, and criminal justice system. In 2014, substance use cost Ontario \$14.7 billion, or \$1,074 per person. Alcohol causes the most harm to society, in dollars, compared to all other substances.^{4,7}

Substance use can also impact family relationships, stability, and parenting.^{4,22}



Recommendations

Our community can work together to reduce substance use-related impacts of COVID-19.

Public sector, private sector, and not-for-profit leaders can work with people with lived experience with substance use to:

- **Maintain and adequately fund comprehensive programs to prevent substance use and related harms**, including primary prevention programs that provide opportunities for positive youth development.
- **Continue to undertake stigma reduction activities** to create a more inclusive society and health care system free from discrimination or bias.^{4,1}
- **Continue to advocate** for take-home and mobile medically assisted treatment options, injectable opioid agonist therapies, and safer supply programs for people who are most at risk of death due to overdose.^{4,1,4,8.}
- **Apply a trauma-informed approach to service delivery** to address collective and individual trauma, including trauma caused or exacerbated by COVID-19.^{4,13}
- **Raise awareness about healthy coping strategies.**
- **Ensure that prevention, treatment, and harm reduction programs and services are able to continuously serve clients** throughout the pandemic by adapting in-person programs to health and safety guidelines and considering mobile, virtual, and outreach options. Work collaboratively to reduce wait times for addictions services to ensure individuals are getting the care they need.^{4,1,4,2,4,8,4,15}

Footnotes and references are available at [Toward Common Ground](#).

Note: There are limitations associated with the data and research sources included in this Vital Focus. For more information about sources and citations, please go to [Toward Common Ground](#). If you know of research or data about diverse communities not represented in this Vital Focus, please contact us at sarahh@towardcommonground.ca



Addiction is a health issue

If you or someone you know is struggling with alcohol or substance use

- Ask for help if you need it. Talk to a trusted family member or friend, connect with your health care provider, or call **Here 24/7 at 1-844-437-3247**.
- Access supports at **Consumption and Treatment Services**, open daily at the Guelph Community Health Centre.
- Learn about how to **reduce your risks of using substances** during COVID-19. Follow Canada's **low risk alcohol drinking guidelines** and **lower risk cannabis use guidelines**.

Wellington Guelph Drug Strategy

The Wellington Guelph Drug Strategy is a collaboration made up of organizations from across Guelph and Wellington. They develop programs, conduct research, educate and advocate to prevent and respond to local substance use and addiction issues.

