

Primary Preventions of Harms Related to Substance Use: Promising Practices

WHAT IS PRIMARY PREVENTION?

A proactive public health strategy and evidence-based approach to prevent health harms before they occur.

It's about getting upstream: treating social, environmental, and behavioural factors that may be the root cause of substance use.

Primary prevention measures can include:

- Educating youth on substance use harms
- Increasing parents' and caregivers' engagement
- Addressing risk factors linked with substance use

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Substance use is one of the most pressing health crises facing youth in Canada.

- There are at least **74,000 substance-attributable deaths** in Canada every year, that's **more than 200 deaths per day**
- **Drug poisoning is now a leading cause of death** among people aged 10 to 24 in several regions
- About **40% of people aged 15–24** report experiencing harm from alcohol use, while **more than 20%** are at moderate to high risk of health concerns from cannabis use

PRIMARY PREVENTION TACTICS

BEHAVIOURAL INTERVENTIONS

Delay or reduce substance use by changing knowledge, attitudes, skills, and settings.

TYPES

- **Universal:** targets an entire population
- **Selective:** designed for higher-risk individuals

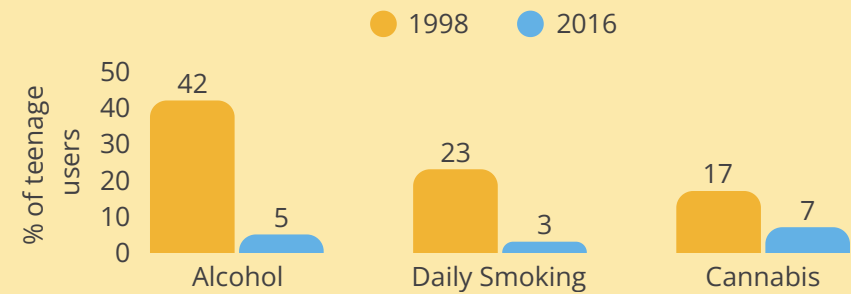
EXAMPLES

- School-based skills training
- Community-based after-school programming
- Family-based interventions

THE ICELANDIC PREVENTION MODEL

- Community-based, data-driven approach that reduces youth substance use
- Strengthens health-promoting protective factors (i.e., family support, peer relationships, leisure activities)
- Reduces risk factors linked with substance use (i.e., school disengagement, lack of supervision, poor mental health)

Iceland's reduction in teenage substance use, 1998 to 2016



PREVENTURE

- A selective, **personality-targeted program** with two 90-minute sessions
- Screens for traits linked to substance misuse, including impulsivity, sensation seeking, and anxiety
- Builds coping, goal-setting, and decision-making skills
- **Results:** Reduces the likelihood of substance use disorders by about 35% compared to peers, as well as delays when youth start using substances, and lowers harms

REGULATORY INTERVENTIONS

Reduce harm by modifying the price, availability and visibility of legal substances.

EXAMPLES

- Increasing price (e.g., through taxation)
- Restricting physical availability (e.g., hours of sale, retail outlet density)
- Limiting marketing and promotion

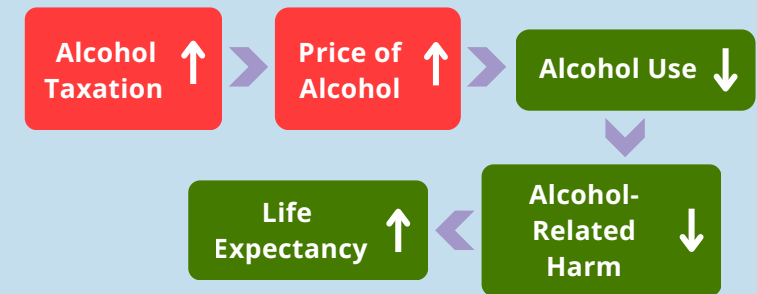
ALCOHOL TAXATION IN LITHUANIA

2015–2018: Lithuania introduced major alcohol policy reforms, including price hikes, advertising bans, and tighter sales restrictions including increasing the legal age from 18 → 20 and reducing retail hours.

Impact:

- 1,000+ deaths prevented per year
- 3.2% drop in overall mortality
- Sharp decline in deaths among 18–22-year-olds

Outcomes of alcohol taxation in Lithuania



CANNABIS REGULATIONS IN QUÉBEC

- **Minimum age:** 21
- **Government monopoly** on sales
- **Ban on products** that may appeal to young people (e.g. gummies, chocolate) and items with **more than 30% THC**
- **Impact:** Lower exposure to cannabis advertising, and slower growth in cannabis use vs. rest of Canada, especially among 18–20-year-olds

IMPLICATIONS

To effectively reduce substance use-related harms, prevention efforts must include:

- Behavioural **interventions that empower people**, families, and communities
- Regulatory **interventions that reduce risk** and create safer, healthier environments

RECOMMENDATIONS

Key considerations for policymakers, service providers, funders, and community leaders include:

- **Give young people credible, balanced information** about substance use
- **Invest in proven prevention programs;** prioritize programs with strong evidence and scalability
- Use **regulations to create healthier environments**
- **Reject policies that increase access to substances**

LEARN MORE

Further Reading: www.camh.ca/primaryprevention

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