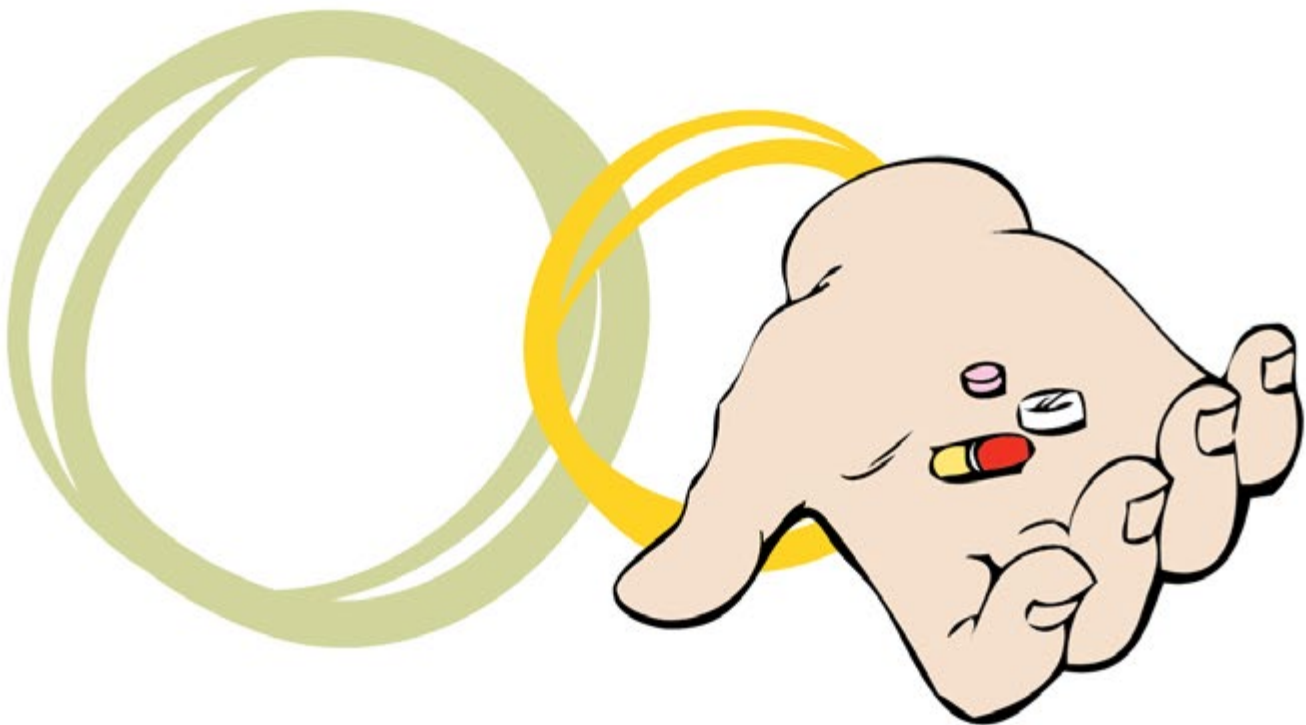

Substance use

Disclaimer: This is not an addiction resource. If you are struggling with substance use and are looking for support, contact the Student Wellness Centre to book an appointment with our medical or counselling staff or visit our website where you can find other resources external to McMaster.



Talking about substances

When discussing substance use and whether it has become problematic, it is good to understand the language which describes certain patterns of behaviour. Here is the useful terminology to describe your relationship with substances.

Substance misuse: Using a drug in a way that is not consistent with how it was prescribed. This may include taking a medication that is not prescribed to you, taking the incorrect dose or frequency, or using the drug for an alternative purpose (e.g., studying).

Substance abuse: When chronic use of a substance begins to impair aspects of life:

- Health complications
- Inability to carry out daily responsibilities
- Physiological dependence
- Cravings and drug-seeking behaviour

Physiological dependence: Increasing tolerance for a substance, withdrawal signs and symptoms when discontinued, or continued use of a substance to avoid withdrawal.

Psychological dependence or addiction: Psychological symptoms which demonstrate a loss of control or compulsive drug-seeking behaviour. Continued use of a substance despite clearly adverse consequences.



When considering whether your drinking habits are reasonable, it's good to revisit Canada's low risk drinking guidelines.

The following table shows what one standard drink looks like depending on the type of alcohol you are drinking.

Typical Drink	Alcohol Content	Volume
Beer, Cider, Cooler	5%	341 ml (12 oz)
Wine	12%	142 ml (5 oz)
Distilled alcohol (vodka, rum, gin, etc.)	40%	43 ml (1.5 oz)

Canada's low risk drinking guidelines for men

- Reduce long term health risks by drinking no more than 15 drinks a week, with no more than 3 drinks a day on most days
- Reduce risk of injury or harm by drinking no more than 4 drinks on any single occasion.
- Those under 24 years should never exceed the daily and weekly limits suggested due to potential harms to brain and body development

When zero's the limit

- Driving a vehicle
- Operating machinery or tools
- Taking medicine or other drugs which interact with alcohol
- Dangerous physical activity
- Mental or physical health problems
- Alcohol dependence
- Responsible for others safety
- Making important decisions



Safer Drinking Tips

Set your limits: Being able to stick to the limits you set for your drinking habits is a good way to recognize whether you are in control of how much you drink. Without tracking your drinks, you may not recognize when you are drinking too much, or if you are drinking more than the standard guidelines.

- **Minimum of 2 off-days:** To prevent developing a habit, plan at least 2 days a week where you won't drink at all.
- **Drink slowly:** It's recommended you have no more than 2 drinks in any 3 hours.
- **Alternate non-alcoholic drinks:** For every alcoholic drink, have one non-alcoholic drink to stay hydrated and minimize the harmful effects. This will also help you slow down how quickly you are drinking.
- **Eat food:** Always eat before and while you are drinking.
- **Consider yourself:** Age, body weight, existing health problems, or medication use can all impact the effects of alcohol. Consider these factors and decide whether lower limits are more reasonable for yourself.

Is my drinking problematic?

These are the characteristics of alcohol dependence which may be useful in identifying whether you should be proactive in employing reduction techniques or seeking support.

Tolerance: You have increased the amount of alcohol you consume over time to achieve the previous effects, either by the number of drinks you consume on a single day or the number of days you drink in a week.

Withdrawal symptoms: Physical symptoms such as insomnia, tremors, and mood swings after going a short period without drinking.

Drinking to avoid or relieve withdrawal symptoms: In attempts to cure a hangover or the shakes, you begin to drink again.

Awareness of the compulsion to drink: You may be aware of your cravings for alcohol, regardless of whether you admit to it.

Drinking in larger amounts: Over a longer period and you have made unsuccessful efforts to cut down.

Cannabis

Following Canada's Lower-Risk Cannabis Use Guidelines can help you reduce the health risks of non-medical cannabis use:

1. Every form of cannabis poses risks for your health
2. The earlier you begin to use cannabis, the higher your risk of health problems. You'll lower risk of cannabis-related health problems if you choose to start using cannabis later in life
3. CBD can counteract some of the psychoactive effects that THC have. Choose lower strength products with lower THC content or higher ratio of CBD to THC.
4. Avoid using synthetic cannabis products such as K2 and spice. They are stronger and riskier than natural cannabis products.
5. Smoking cannabis (e.g., joint) is the most harmful way to use cannabis because it directly affects your lungs. Non-smoking options like vaping or taking edibles are better, but not risk-free.
6. Avoid inhaling deeply or holding your breath when smoking cannabis. These practices increase the amount of toxins absorbed by your lungs .
7. The more frequently you use cannabis, the more likely you are to develop problems. Limiting use to occasional at most, such as once a week or on weekends is a good way to reduce health risks.
8. Cannabis use impairs your ability to drive or operate machinery. These types of impairments typically last at least six hours, but could be longer, depending on the person and the product use.
9. People with personal or family history of psychosis or substance use problems should not use cannabis.
10. Avoid combining risky behaviours; the more risks you take, the greater your chances of harming your health (e.g., high THC content product and smoking and holding your breath is more harmful than one of these risky behaviours alone)

A note on using edibles:

"A lesser known but important harm of non-medical cannabis use is the increased risk of unintentional overdose injuries. These injuries arise most often after the ingestion of cannabis-infused foods, also known as edibles (NASEM, 2017), which come in many forms, including candies and baked goods such as cookies or brownies."

Study Drugs

Study drugs are typically stimulants prescribed by a doctor to an individual for treating conditions such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). These include Adderall, Dexedrine, Vyvanse, Ritalin, Concerta, etc.

These medications are misused by some students without ADHD to stay awake, alert, and more focused when studying. However, reliance on external validation, limited parental attention, low self-esteem, and mental health issues are underlying reasons which may provoke use of study drugs as well.

Side Effects	Risk of use over time
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Headache• Dry mouth• Nausea• Appetite loss• Agitation• Restlessness• Sleep problems• Change in sex drive	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• High blood pressure• Irregular heartbeat• Heart failure• Dizziness• Insomnia• Mental health risks such as intense anger & paranoia• High addiction potential, equal to that of street drugs• Withdrawal symptoms such as depression, suicidal thoughts, cravings, sleep problems, fatigue



Alternatives to Study Drugs

While it may be tempting to use study drugs in order to get that additional boost you think you need nearing a large assessment, there are many alternatives to prevent the need for employing this dangerous habit.

Meditation: Having a consistent meditation routine has been shown to reduce stress, which thus improves focus when attempting to study.

Good Sleep: Regulating your sleep schedule and getting between 7-9 hours of sleep each night is extremely important for learning. Do not skip out on sleep. Visit our sleep section for helpful tips on creating your sleep routine.

Exercise: Getting active boosts your learning, memory, and concentration. Over time, regular exercise improves mood, helps sleep, and reduces stress, all of which will help you do better on your assessments as well.

Fueling yourself with food: Eating regularly the nutrients you require will help your body and mind operate how you want it to when entering a stressful assessment.

