

# Substance use among young adolescents

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Addiction Switzerland, March 2023

## Introduction

Adolescence is characterized, among other things, by a need for experimentation, sensation-seeking and the search for novelty, as well as a (relatively) high level of risk-taking, e.g., with substance use. While exploratory behaviors can be considered as a normal part of the developmental process, they can have short-term negative health consequences and can develop into frequent use.

Preventing the initiation and delaying the onset of substance use, as well as avoiding the onset of regular use and its associated acute harms (e.g., intoxication) are therefore the major goals of structural (e.g., reducing the accessibility and attractiveness of products) and behavioural prevention efforts targeting youth.

This fact sheet presents a selection of results from the HBSC 2022 survey on substance use among 11-, 13- and 15-year-olds in Switzerland and its evolution over time. It also includes first national results on mixtures including pharmaceutical drugs.

## The method in short

The international study *Health Behaviour in School-aged Children* (HBSC) is conducted every four years under the auspices of the World Health Organization (WHO-Europe). Currently, more than 50 countries are participating.

The HBSC survey is a nationally representative monitoring study on the health and health behaviours of young adolescents. Based on a cluster sampling, 857 classes in 5<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade (7<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> year HarmoS) were randomly selected, and 636 classes participated in the 2022 survey (9'345 schoolchildren aged from 11 to 15 years) which equals a participation rate of 74.2%.

The survey is based on a standardized self-administered paper questionnaire, which was completed in the classroom between March and June 2022. Participation was voluntary (with passive parental consent), and the answers were strictly confidential.

For ethical reasons, most of the questions – except for alcohol consumption, conventional cigarette and e-cigarette use – were asked only to the 14- and 15-year-olds.

The sex/gender analyses are thus based on the international question 'Are you a boy or a girl?'. Therefore, it is not possible to know whether students answered the question with reference to their sex assigned at birth or their gender identity.

In Switzerland, the HBSC study is conducted by Addiction Switzerland and financed by the Federal Office of Public Health (FOPH) and most of the cantons.

## Key figures 2022 for 15-year-olds



About **23%** had at least one episode of binge drinking in the last 30 days

About **10%** have used illegal cannabis ( $\geq 1\%$  of THC) at least 1x in the last 30 days



About **7%** have used a pharmaceutical drug in combination with alcohol at least 1x in their lifetime

About **75%** have used at least one substance in their lifetime



About **36%** have used at least one tobacco and/or nicotine product in the last 30 days



**4%** have used pharmaceutical drugs « to get high » at least 1x in their lifetime

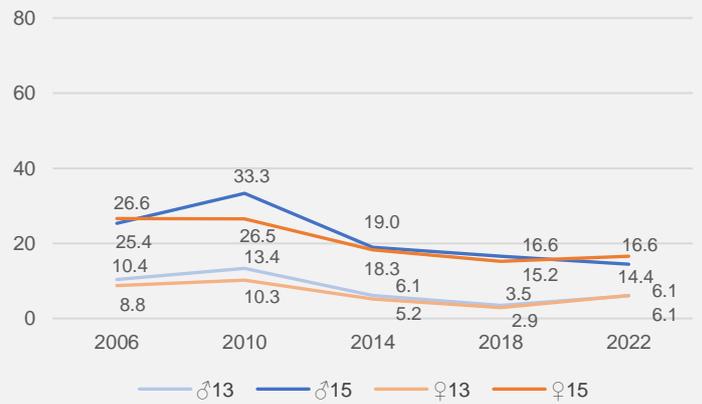
Alcohol consumption ≥ 1x in the last 30 days, age 13 and 15 (HBSC 2006-2022; %)



In 2022, about 5% of 11-year-olds (B:7.3%; G:3.7%) used alcohol in the past 30 days, compared with about 17% of 13-year-olds and 43% of 15-year-olds. Compared to 2018, the 30-day prevalence seems to have increased among 13-year-old boys and girls and among 15-year-old girls, while it seems to have decreased among boys of the same age. Hence, **15-year-old girls are catching up to boys**. About 2% of 15-year-olds used alcohol frequently (≥ 10 days in the past 30 days). Daily drinking is almost non-existent at this age.

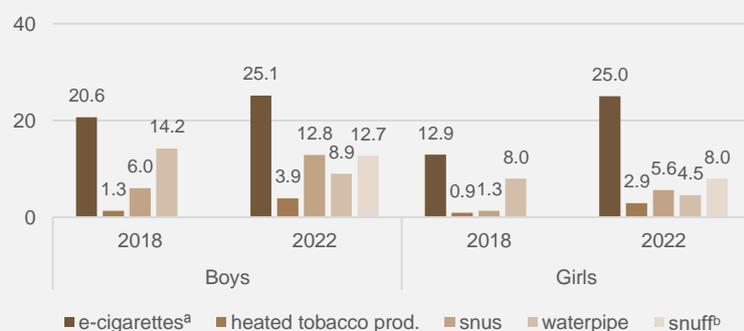
In 2022, less than 2% of 11-year-olds, about 6% of 13-year-olds and about 16% of 15-year-olds have used conventional cigarettes in the past 30 days. Stable between 2018 and 2022 among 15-year-olds, this proportion nearly doubled among 13-year-olds. Frequent use (≥ 10 days/last 30 days) involves about 6% of the 15-year-olds and daily use about 3%.

Conventional cigarette use ≥ 1x in the past 30 days, age 13 and 15 (HBSC 2006-2022; %)



Less than 2% of 11-year-olds, about 10% of 13-year-olds (B:10.7%; G:10.0%) and about 25% of the 15-year-olds have used e-cigarettes in the past 30 days. Frequent use involves about 7% of the 15-year-olds and daily use about 2%. Among 15-year-olds who have used e-cigarettes ≥ 1x in their life, **curiosity/trying something new** is the predominant motive (92%). For some, it is an help to reduce (15%) or stop smoking (11%). Between 2018 and 2022, among 15-year-olds, use ≥ 1x in the past 30 days is increasing sharply for e-cigarettes, heated tobacco products and snus, especially among girls. In contrast, it is declining for the waterpipe. The frequent use of e-cigarette also increased sharply, especially among girls.

Use of other products ≥ 1x in the past 30 days, age 15 (HBSC 2018-2022; %)



Notes: <sup>a</sup> potentially includes puffs (single-use e-cigarettes); <sup>b</sup> tobacco to sniff

**Conventional cigarette, e-cigarette, heated tobacco products** - In 2022, about 11% of 15-year-olds (B:10.4%; G:10.9%) used at least one of these three products frequently (2018: B:9.5%; G:6.0%).

Hierarchy of alcoholic beverages, 15-year-olds <sup>a</sup>



Note: <sup>a</sup> In descending order of at least weekly consumption

Alcohol use may take the form of binge drinking. About a quarter of the 15-year-olds (B:24.5%; G:22.6%) drank five or more alcoholic beverages on a single occasion (within a short period of time) ≥ 1x in the past 30 days. This proportion has been relatively stable since 2014. Most of those who engaged in binge drinking did so only once or twice.

### Legislation

**Alcohol** In Switzerland the sale and distribution of beer and wine to under 16-year-olds and liquor to under 18-year-olds is forbidden. In Ticino, the age limit is 18 for all alcoholic beverages.

**Tobacco and/or nicotine products** 9 cantons prohibit the sale of tobacco products to under 16-year-olds, 15 other cantons to under 18-year-olds and 2 cantons have no regulations in this matter. Additionally, 9 cantons prohibit the sale of e-cigarettes to under 18-year-olds.

**Cannabis products** In Switzerland the possession, trade, cultivation and consumption of cannabis containing ≥ 1% THC is prohibited (NarcA). The sale of products containing mainly CBD (and < 1% THC) is not subject to the NarcA but, depending on the type of preparation, is regulated by different legislation.

## Access to the products

In 2022, among the 15-year-olds who drank alcohol in the last 30 days, about 22% **purchased** it  $\geq 1x$  themselves (store, kiosk, bar, restaurant<sup>a</sup>). Among those who have used conventional cigarettes, the rate reaches about 48% (including vending machines<sup>a</sup>). But the adolescents acquire these products mainly **through people they know**, such as friends and parents (about 80% and 75% resp.). The situation is comparable to 2018.

Note: <sup>a</sup> In theory, this does not include potential Internet purchase.

## Pharmaceutical drugs

Psychoactive pharmaceutical drugs are sometimes diverted from their medical indications to seek psychotropic experiences. Mixing them with other substances can be very dangerous.

Proportion of 15-year-olds who have used the following pharmaceutical drugs/mixtures  $\geq 1x$  in their lifetime (HBSC 2022; %)

	Boys	Girls
pharmaceutical drugs «to get high»	4.3	4.8
pharmaceutical drugs with alcohol	5.1	8.8
«lean» or «purple drank» <sup>a</sup>	6.0	1.8
tranquilizers/strong painkillers «to get high» <sup>b</sup>	2.3	4.9

Notes: <sup>a</sup> Mixed « homemade » drink based on cough sirop containing codeine and dextromethorphan, lemonade and sometimes alcohol or other substances or ingredients ; <sup>b</sup> The study does not say whether they are prescribed or not.

In 2022, as in 2018, about 4% of 15-year-olds reported taking a **pharmaceutical drug with the intention of «getting high»**  $\geq 1x$  in their lifetime, although the exact type of drug is unclear. Use of strong painkillers or tranquilizers «to get high» as well as mixtures that include pharmaceutical drugs are also not uncommon. For all four drugs or mixtures, most 15-year-olds have used them only once.

Additional information: Less than 1% of 15-year-olds have used anabolics  $\geq 1x$  in their lifetime.

## Additional informations

Delgrande Jordan, M., Balsiger., N. & Schmidhauser, V. (2023). La consommation de substances psychoactives des 11 à 15 ans en Suisse – Situation en 2022 et évolution dans le temps – Résultats de l'étude Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) (rapport de recherche No 149). Lausanne: Addiction Suisse.

Statistical standard tables at [www.hbsc.ch](http://www.hbsc.ch)

Monitoring System of Addiction and NCDs (MonAM): [www.obsan.admin.ch/en/MonAM](http://www.obsan.admin.ch/en/MonAM)

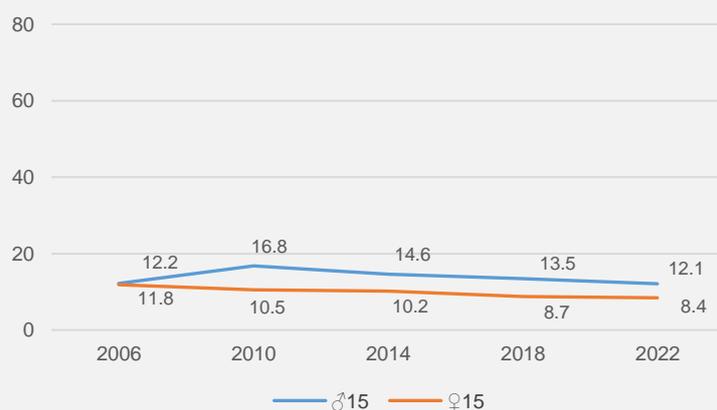
## Acknowledgements

Special thanks go to the schoolchildren (as well as their parents and teachers) who, by agreeing to participate in the survey, contributed to a very important part of this research project.

## Cannabis products

In 2022, about 10% of 15-year-olds used **illegal cannabis**  $\geq 1x$  in the past 30 days, a rate comparable to 2018. The proportion of 15-year-olds who **frequently** used this substance ( $\geq 10$  days in the past 30 days) is about 2% for girls and 2.6% for boys, and in their case, seems to be decreasing compared to 2018. Daily use is almost non-existent at this age. About 5% of 15-year-olds (B:6.5%; G:4.0%) have used **products containing primarily CBD** in the past 30 days. That's almost double than in 2018. Frequent use is almost non-existent.

Illegal cannabis use  $\geq 1x$  in past 30 days, age 15 (HBSC 2006-2022; %)



## Other illegal substances

In 2022, about 5% of 15-year-olds (B:5.1%; G:4.0%) reported having used at least one **illegal substance other than cannabis**  $\geq 1x$  in their lifetime.

Note: <sup>a</sup> cocaine, ecstasy, amphetamines, LSD, hallucinogenic mushrooms, new synthetic substances or heroin.

## Conclusions

Substance use increases between 11-year-olds and 15-year-olds, with the latter only having a minority reporting no use of any substances in their lifetime.

Substance use is most often experimental or sporadic. However, **frequent use** and **mixing of products involving pharmaceutical drugs** are found among a non-negligible - given the associated risks - minority of the 15-year-olds. In addition, **the sharp increases** observed between 2018 and 2022 in the use of e-cigarettes, heated tobacco products and snus **in the past 30 days** among 15-year-olds, especially among girls, as well as in the conventional cigarettes use among 13-year-olds are concerning. Finally, in general, the gaps between girls and boys are narrowing.