

# Alcohol, Tobacco, and Substance Use

## DEFINITION

*Alcohol, tobacco, and substance use* is the percentage of middle school and high school students who report using alcohol, tobacco products (including e-cigarettes), and illicit substances.

## SIGNIFICANCE

The use and/or abuse of alcohol, tobacco, and other substances by youth impacts the health and safety of themselves, their families, their schools, and their communities.<sup>1,2</sup> Rhode Island is ranked 25th among states for adolescents' reported use of alcohol and many types of illicit drugs.<sup>3</sup>

Key risk periods for alcohol, tobacco, and other drug abuse occur during major life transitions, including the shifts to middle school and high school, when young people experience new academic, social, and emotional challenges. Adolescents are especially vulnerable to experimenting with substance use because their brains are still developing. The area of the brain responsible for impulse control and risk assessment is not developed until youth reach their twenties.<sup>1,4</sup>

Pathways for becoming a substance user involve the relationship between risk and protective factors, which vary in their effect on different people. Risk factors are associated with increased drug use and include early aggressive

behavior, poor school achievement, peer and parental substance use, chaotic home environment, and poverty. Protective factors lessen the risk of drug use and include a strong parent-child bond, healthy school environment, academic competence, and attachment to their communities.<sup>1,4</sup> Rates of substance use are higher among certain racial/ethnic groups and LGBTQ youth, compared to their peers. Recent research found there were differences in alcohol, marijuana, nicotine, and illicit substance use by race and ethnicity.<sup>4-6</sup>

Prevention and reduction in teen substance abuse can be achieved by enacting policies that support prevention, screening, early intervention, treatment, and recovery. Policy examples include preventing underage substance use and sales to minors, improving school climate and academic achievement, enacting sentencing reform, and providing adequate funding for multi-sector youth development, treatment, and recovery services.<sup>4</sup>

In Rhode Island in 2022 and 2023, 11.3% of youth ages 12-17 (about 8,000 youth) needed substance use treatment, while only 5.3% (about 4,000 youth) actually received any substance use treatment in the past year.<sup>3,7</sup>



## Tobacco Use Among Rhode Island Youth

- ◆ In 2023, 17% of Rhode Island high school students reported currently smoking cigarettes or using electronic vapor products (i.e., e-cigarettes, e-cigars, e-pipes, vaping pipes/pens, e-hookahs/pens), down from 32% in 2019. Current use is defined as use on at least one day during the 30 days before the survey.<sup>8</sup>
- ◆ **E-Cigarettes:** E-cigarettes and electronic vapor products contain, among other chemicals, nicotine which is highly addictive and can harm brain development. Some e-cigarette pods have as much as or more nicotine than a pack of cigarettes.<sup>9</sup> Nationally in 2024, 8% of high school students reported current e-cigarette use.<sup>10</sup> In Rhode Island in 2023, 17% of high school students reported current use of e-cigarettes and 32% reported ever using e-cigarettes.<sup>8</sup>
- ◆ **Cigarettes:** Cigarette use has steadily declined among U.S. middle and high school students. Nationally, in 2025, 1% of students reported current cigarette use.<sup>10</sup> In 2023, 3% of Rhode Island high school students reported currently smoking cigarettes.<sup>8</sup>
- ◆ **Hookah, cigars, and smokeless tobacco:** The prevalence of youth hookah, cigar, and smokeless tobacco use has declined nationally.<sup>11</sup> In 2023, 4% of Rhode Island high school students reported currently smoking cigars, and 3% reported current use of smokeless tobacco.<sup>8</sup>



## Tobacco to 21

- ◆ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Institute of Medicine, and the American Academy of Pediatrics suggest that raising the minimum legal sale age for tobacco products to 21 may prevent or delay initiation of tobacco use by adolescents.<sup>12-14</sup> Nationally, nearly 90% of adult cigarette users who smoke daily report starting by age 18.<sup>15</sup> On December 20, 2019, legislation was signed raising the federal minimum age of sale of tobacco products and electronic nicotine delivery systems from 18 to 21 years, effective immediately.<sup>16</sup> Despite this law, there is still a 12% noncompliance rate in Rhode Island with some vendors continuing to sell to underage groups.<sup>17</sup>



## Current Substance Use, Rhode Island Middle School and High School Students, 2022-2024

	ALCOHOL USE*	CANNABIS USE* (EDIBLE)	CANNABIS USE* (SMOKING)	CIGARETTE USE*	E-CIGARETTE USE*	IN-HALENTS	PRESCRIPTION DRUG MISUSE**
Middle School Students, 2022	5.2%	NR	5.4%	1.8%	6.1%	3.1%	1.8%
Middle School Students, 2024	4.8%	2.4%	7.8%	2.0%	5.6%	3.5%	1.9%
High School Students, 2022	14.5%	NR	14.9%	3.5%	12.9%	2.1%	2.3%
High School Students, 2024	10.0%	3.5%	10.9%	2.8%	7.1%	2.0%	2.1%

Source: Rhode Island Department of Behavioral Healthcare, Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals. (2024). *Rhode Island Student Survey*. \*Current use is defined as students who answered yes to using respective substances in the 30 days prior to the survey. \*\*Prescription drug misuse is defined as ever taking prescription pain medicine without a doctor's prescription or differently than doctor told them to use it. NA is not available due to small sample size. NR is not reported in the 2022 survey.

- ◆ In 2024, 4.8% of Rhode Island middle school students reported current alcohol consumption (down from 5.2% in 2022), 5.6% reported current use of e-cigarettes (down from 6.1% in 2022), and 2.4% reported current edible cannabis use.<sup>18</sup>
- ◆ In 2024, 7.8% of Rhode Island middle school students reported currently smoking cannabis (up from 5.4% in 2022), 3.5% reported current inhalant use, 2.0% reported current cigarette use, and 1.9% reported prescription drug misuse.<sup>18</sup>
- ◆ In 2024, 10.9% of Rhode Island high school students reported currently smoking cannabis (down from 14.9% in 2022), 10.0% reported current alcohol consumption (down from 14.5% in 2022), and 7.1% reported current use of e-cigarettes (down from 12.9% in 2022).<sup>18</sup>
- ◆ In 2024, 3.5% of Rhode Island high school students reported current edible cannabis use, 2.8% reported current cigarette use, and 2.1% reported prescription drug misuse.<sup>18</sup>
- ◆ In 2024, 25% of Rhode Island high school students reported ever consuming alcohol, 18% reported ever smoking cannabis, 15% reported ever using e-cigarettes, and 4% reported ever misusing prescription drugs.<sup>18</sup>



## Cigarette Taxes

- ◆ Cigarette taxes are a potential funding stream for state tobacco control programs, as well as a strategy for reducing consumption among kids and adults.<sup>19</sup> During the 2025 session, legislation passed that expands the language defining “other tobacco products” for the purposes of taxation to explicitly include nicotine pouches, which were not previously included.<sup>20</sup>



## Family and Community Exposure

- ◆ Having parents or friends who use tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs, as well as living in communities where there is substance use, are risk factors for teen substance use.<sup>4</sup>
- ◆ Most high school students who misused prescription drugs in the past 30 days (29%) reported receiving it from a family member. Most high school students who consumed alcohol in the past 30 days reported receiving it from a family member (33%).<sup>18</sup>
- ◆ More than one in ten (13%) of Rhode Island high school students who used an e-cigarette during the past 30 days reported buying it in a store without an ID, despite laws prohibiting sales to youth under age 21.<sup>18</sup>

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