



Department of Health
Agency of Human Services



2015 Youth Risk Behavior Survey Reveals Good News and Critical Challenges



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*Positive trends in lower alcohol use and more physical activity
Concerns about mental health, e-cigarettes and marijuana*

BURLINGTON – Use of alcohol among Vermont high school students decreased significantly in the past two years, according to the newly released 2015 Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey. In 2013, nearly 60 percent of high school students reported ever drinking alcohol. In 2015, that figure dropped to 56 percent.

The Youth Risk Behavior Survey is administered at school every other year to students in grades six through 12, and details the prevalence of a wide range of behaviors that affect health – from smoking, drinking and drug use, to physical activity, nutrition and weight, to violence and mental health status. The survey is conducted by the Vermont Department of Health and Agency of Education. More than 21,000 high school students (grades 9-12), and 13,600 middle school students (grades 6-8) participated in the latest survey, conducted during February and March 2015.

High risk alcohol use, or binge drinking, decreased among high schoolers. Likewise, fewer students smoked in 2015. The survey also found that the percentage of middle schoolers who are physically active is up, and fewer high schoolers are overweight or drinking sugar-sweetened beverages.

“There is a lot of good news here. The data tells us that in many areas, young Vermonters are making increasingly good and healthy life choices for themselves,” said Health Commissioner Harry Chen, MD. “We’re seeing trends that indicate our efforts are continuing to bend the curve in favor of the number of young people who are not engaging in risky and unsafe behaviors.”

Chen said the report also provides important data that the Health Department uses to determine critical areas that require increased focus, such as the use of e-cigarettes and marijuana.

In the 2015 survey, students were asked for the first time about the use of vapor tobacco products and flavored tobacco products: 30 percent of high school students reported ever smoking e-cigarettes, and 24 percent have used flavored tobacco products at some point in their lifetime.

And now, more high school students used marijuana (22%) in the past 30 days than smoked cigarettes (11%).

Survey data shows significantly fewer middle and high school students think someone their age is at great risk of harm from smoking marijuana. Significantly fewer middle school students believe their parents would think it's wrong for them to use marijuana, and fewer think they risk harm from having five or more drinks on a weekend.

“Certain risky behaviors are trending down, but fewer students think there is potential harm in using marijuana, smoking cigarettes, and in high risk drinking,” said Dr. Chen. “This is a worry to me, especially for middle schoolers, who will have more opportunities for experimentation as they get older, but who might not fully understand the consequences.”

Health officials also cited mental health issues, especially related to suicide, as a significant concern. The percentage of both high school and middle school students who report feeling sad or hopeless, and those who have thought seriously about or even attempted suicide has increased since the last survey.

Said Dr. Chen: “The Youth Risk Behavior Survey is one of our most important tools. Not just for the Health Department, but also for starting discussions in schools and at home with students and families, and informing our communities about the very real issues and pressures our youth face. With this data, we can all be partners in helping students better understand their own behaviors, so they can make the right choices for themselves and live long, healthy lives.”

The 2015 Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey full report, statewide highlights, and related data are available at: <http://healthvermont.gov/research/yrbs/2015>

Selected Highlights —

Alcohol – *Fewer students drank alcohol in 2015 than in 2013. Binge drinking is down, but fewer perceive risk of harm from alcohol.*

- 6% of middle school students drank alcohol in the past 30 days; 6% drank before age 11
- 30% of high schoolers drank alcohol in the past 30 days, down from 33% in 2013
- 16% of high school students reported binge drinking in the past 30 days, down from 19% in 2013
- 88% of middle schoolers believe it is wrong to drink alcohol
- 48% of middle school students think kids their age risk great harm from having five or more drinks once or twice each weekend, a significant decrease from 51%

Smoking and Tobacco – *Fewer students smoked, and fewer were exposed to secondhand smoke. Use of e-cigarettes is higher than regular cigarette use.*

- 9% of middle school students have ever tried cigarette smoking, same as in 2013
- 11% of high school students currently smoke, a decrease from 13% in 2013
- 7% of middle school students have tried an electronic vapor product
- 30% of high school students have tried an electronic vapor product, 15% in the past 30 days
- 52% of high school students usually saw advertisements for tobacco products at a convenience store, supermarket, or gas station

Marijuana and Other Drugs – *Marijuana use remained essentially unchanged, but perception of harm is down. Prescription drug misuse has declined.*

- 7% of middle school and 37% of high school students have ever used marijuana
- 4% of middle school and 22% of high school students used marijuana in the past 30 days
- 59% of middle school and 27% of high school students think someone their age is at great risk of harm from smoking marijuana, significantly down from 64% and 31% in 2013
- 11% of high school students have ever misused a prescription drug, a decrease from 13% in 2013

Mental Health and Suicide – *More students felt sad or hopeless for significant stretches of time. The percentage of students who made a suicide plan or attempted suicide increased.*

- 20% of middle school and 24% of high school students were so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more that they stopped usual activities, up from 18% and 21% in 2013
- 18% of middle school students seriously considered suicide and 12% made a suicide plan
- 12% of high school students made a suicide plan, a significant increase from 11% in 2013 and 9% in 2011
- 6% of both middle school and high school students have attempted suicide in their lifetime, a significant increase from 5% in 2013

Nutrition and Physical Activity – *Fewer students are overweight, and consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages is down.*

- 39% of middle school students participated in daily physical activity breaks
- 14% of high school students are overweight, significantly down from 16% in 2013
- 52% of middle and 40% of high school students are eating breakfast every day
- 23% of high school students were physically active for at least 60 minutes a day, down from 25% in 2013

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