

# Alcohol and cannabis use during the pandemic: Canadian Perspectives Survey Series 6

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The pandemic has been a source of significant stress and concern for many Canadians because of the social and economic upheavals it has caused. The public health crisis caused by the pandemic has had an impact on almost all aspects of social life. New evidence suggests it may have also had an influence on the alcohol and drug consumption habits of Canadians. Some may have had more free time to consume alcohol and non-medical cannabis, while others may have increased their consumption in an effort to relieve boredom or fight loneliness.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Statistics Canada has conducted a series of web panel surveys on a regular basis, as part of the Canadian Perspectives Survey Series, to see how Canadians are reacting to the pandemic. All of the surveys are statistically representative of the Canadian population.

The most recent survey of the series, conducted from January 25 to 31, 2021, addressed changes in the alcohol, drug and medication consumption habits of Canadians, compared with the pre-pandemic period. This release, however, focuses on alcohol and cannabis use, the two most commonly used substances in Canada. Future analyses using these survey data will provide information about the use of other substances.

Current results show that the habits of the majority of Canadians who had previously consumed alcohol or cannabis (54% in both cases) did not change compared with the pre-pandemic period. Of those who had previously consumed alcohol, nearly one-quarter (24%) said their consumption had increased during the pandemic, while almost as many (22%) said their consumption had decreased. Of those who had previously consumed cannabis, more than one-third (34%) said their consumption had increased during the pandemic. Respondents indicated that stress, boredom and loneliness contributed to that increase.

## **The number of Canadians who increased their alcohol consumption is similar to the number of those who decreased their consumption**

In January 2021, two-thirds (66%) of Canadians aged 15 or older, or nearly 21 million people, reported consuming alcohol at least once in the previous 30 days. For the majority of these people, their alcohol consumption level was moderate. Overall, 32% had one drink on the days they consumed alcohol during the 30-day period, and 31% had two drinks.

By contrast, close to one in five people (18%) consumed five or more drinks—the equivalent of a bottle of wine—on the days they had consumed alcohol in the previous month. This proportion was higher than what was recorded before the pandemic.

In fact, in 2017, 11% of Canadians reported having had five or more drinks on the days they consumed alcohol. These results suggest that some people may have increased their alcohol consumption during the pandemic. Among Canadians who had previously consumed alcohol, close to one in four (24%) believed their consumption had increased, compared with the pre-pandemic period.

At the provincial level, Ontario (30%) had the greatest increase in reported alcohol consumption, followed by the Prairie provinces (27%), British Columbia (22%), Quebec (17%) and the Atlantic provinces (16%).

Although alcohol consumption among many Canadians has increased since the onset of the pandemic, more than one in five people (22%) reported a decrease in consumption during the same period. This proportion was even higher among young people. A total of 33% of Canadians aged 15 to 29 who had consumed alcohol in the previous month said they had decreased their consumption during the pandemic, compared with 18% of Canadians aged 30 to 64.



Despite the changes in behaviour reported by a large number of people, the majority (54%) of Canadians who had consumed alcohol before did not change their consumption habits during the pandemic.

Some of those who did not change their habits reported a high level of alcohol consumption. Those who had increased their alcohol consumption during the pandemic were most likely to report frequent heavy drinking—36% had five or more drinks on one occasion at least once a week in the previous 30 days. By comparison, 12% of those who did not change their habits, and 6% of those whose consumption decreased during the pandemic, reported having five or more drinks on one occasion at least once a week.

### **Boredom and stress can explain the increased alcohol consumption of some people**

For some people, social isolation, stress and a decline in mental health may have led to an increase in alcohol consumption. A study on [Canadians' mental health and cannabis, alcohol and tobacco use](#), conducted in March and April 2020, showed that those who reported lower self-perceived mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic were more likely to report increased consumption of cannabis, alcohol and tobacco.

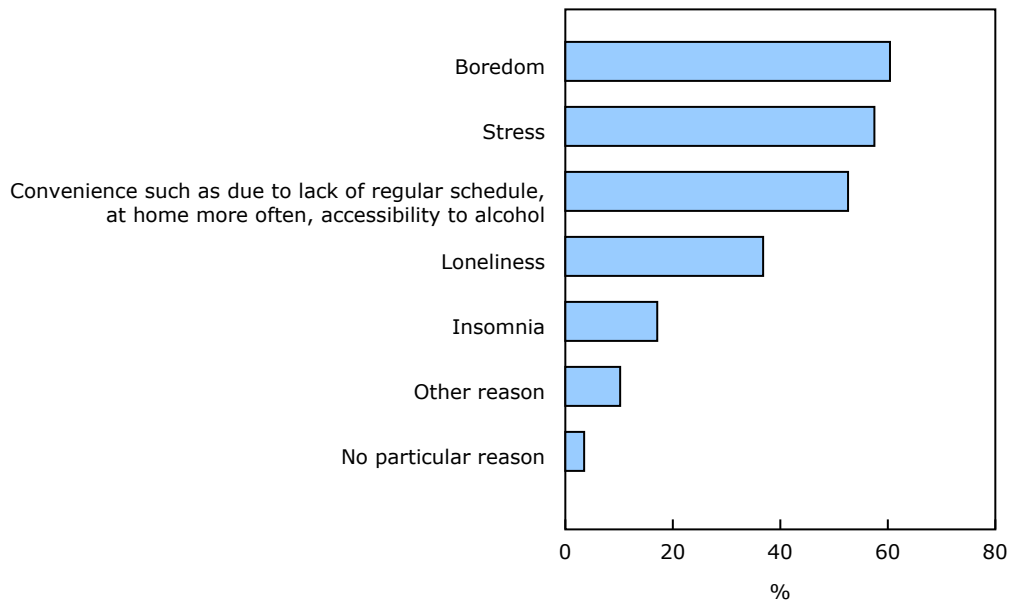
The results of this survey also showed that Canadians who have experienced stress and social isolation since the onset of the pandemic were more likely to have increased their alcohol consumption. For example, 41% of respondents who described the situation since the start of the pandemic as "very stressful" or "extremely stressful" said their alcohol consumption had increased, compared with 16% of those who described the situation as "a little stressful" or "not at all stressful."

Furthermore, among those who said they have "often" or "always" felt isolated from others since the start of the pandemic, 33% reported increased alcohol consumption, compared with 12% of those who "never" or "hardly ever" felt that way.

People who said they had increased their alcohol consumption during the pandemic were asked why their behaviour had changed. The most common reasons given were boredom (60%), stress (58%), and convenience (53%) (e.g., lack of a regular schedule, at home more often, access to alcohol). Loneliness (37%) and insomnia (17%) were also mentioned as reasons for increased alcohol consumption.

**Chart 1**

**Reasons for increased consumption of alcohol since before the COVID-19 pandemic**



Source(s): Canadian Perspectives Survey Series 6 (January 2021).

The reasons given by those whose alcohol consumption had decreased were different. For some respondents, their decreased consumption could be linked to physical distancing and lockdown measures implemented since the onset of the pandemic, as well as to decreased opportunities for socializing with family and friends. In fact, when respondents were asked about the reasons for their reduced consumption, the most frequently given reason (58%) was decreased opportunities for socialization (e.g., gatherings with friends and family, dining in at restaurants). This was followed by personal choice (e.g., weight control, health concerns, dislike of the effects of alcohol), cited by 46% of respondents. Reasons cited much less often were cost (10%), personal responsibilities (8%), or "no particular reason" (9%).

**Just over one-third of people who consume cannabis increased their consumption during the pandemic**

A recent study about [what has changed since cannabis was legalized](#) in October 2018, found that the legalization of cannabis was associated with an increase in overall consumption, especially among people aged 25 and older. The pandemic may have accelerated this trend.

In the January 2021 survey panel, 16% of Canadians reported consuming cannabis at least once during the previous 30 days. Among Canadians who had previously consumed cannabis, more than one in three (34%) said their consumption had increased, compared with the pre-pandemic period, while 12% reported a decrease.

Young people, who are generally most likely to consume cannabis, were more likely to have increased their consumption since the start of the pandemic. Among respondents aged 15 to 29 who had previously consumed cannabis, 43% reported increasing their consumption during the pandemic. By comparison, 20% of respondents aged 50 to 64 and 22% of those aged 65 or older reported a consumption increase.

Although the majority (54%) of people who had previously consumed cannabis did not increase their consumption during the pandemic, many of them continued to consume cannabis most days of the week. Among those whose consumption had not changed, 25% had consumed cannabis five or more days per week in the previous 30 days, compared with 35% of those whose consumption had increased.

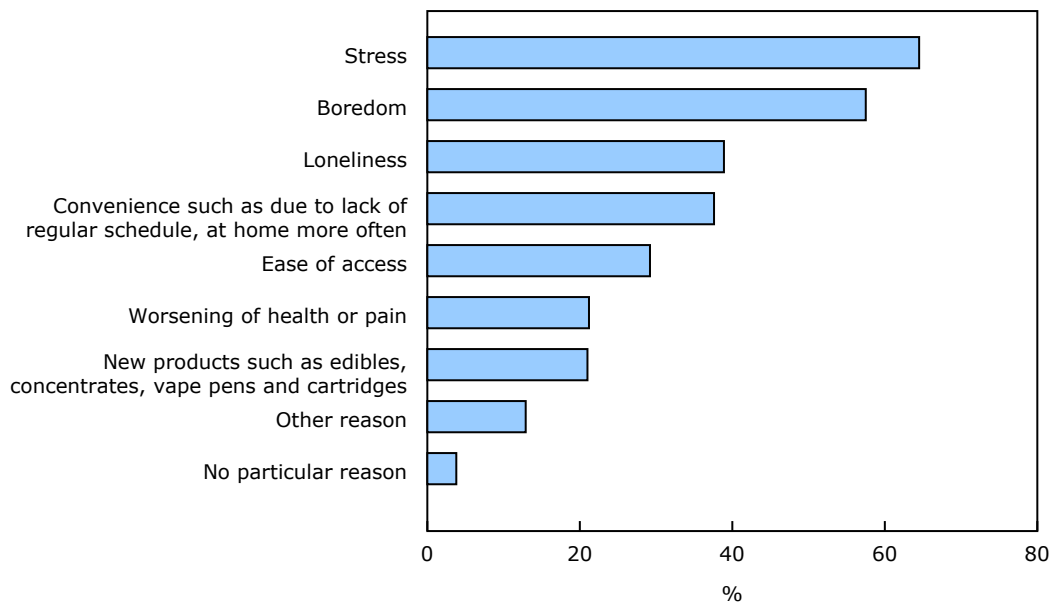
Increased social acceptance of cannabis, and the increased number of outlets and range of products available were among factors thought to have led to increased consumption over the past year. [Recent data on cannabis sales](#) have shown that sales at cannabis stores more than doubled (+120.5%) from 2019 to 2020.

The stress, boredom and social isolation experienced during the pandemic also appeared to be associated with increased cannabis consumption. For example, the proportion of respondents who increased their consumption of cannabis during the pandemic reached 23% among those who "never" or "hardly ever" felt a lack of companionship since the start of the pandemic, compared with 45% of those who "often" or "always" felt this.

As for factors that contributed to increased cannabis consumption during the pandemic, the most frequently given reasons were stress (65%), boredom (58%) and loneliness (39%). These were similar to those provided by respondents who increased their alcohol consumption.

Factors related to ease of access to cannabis also seemed to have contributed to an increase in consumption by some respondents. Among those who increased their consumption, 38% indicated convenience (e.g., lack of a regular schedule, at home more often) as a factor, and 29% mentioned ease of access (e.g., increase in retail stores and online shops, delivery, curbside pickup).

**Chart 2**  
**Reasons for increased consumption of cannabis since before the COVID-19 pandemic**



Source(s): Canadian Perspectives Survey Series 6 (January 2021).

Among the 12% of cannabis users who decreased their use during the pandemic, the three most frequently cited reasons were personal choice, such as dislike of the effects of cannabis (64%), followed by decreased opportunities for socialization (28%) and personal responsibilities (e.g. family or work obligations, too busy) (16%).

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**Note to readers**

*The data in this release are from Statistics Canada's Canadian Perspectives Survey Series (CPSS), for which a panel of Canadians has agreed to complete a number of short online surveys. Because the CPSS uses a probability panel based on the Labour Force Survey, it is representative of the general population. The CPSS enables Statistics Canada to collect important information from Canadians more efficiently, more rapidly and at a lower cost, compared with traditional survey methods. The first iteration of the CPSS was conducted from March 29 to April 3, 2020, and collected information from 4,600 respondents. The second iteration was conducted from May 4 to 10, 2020. The third was conducted from June 15 to 21, 2020. The fourth was conducted from July 20 to 26, 2020, while the fifth was conducted from September 14 to 20, 2020. The sixth iteration, upon which this analysis is based, was conducted from January 25 to 31, 2021.*

**Definitions, data sources and methods: survey number [5311](#).**

For more information, or to enquire about the concepts, methods or data quality of this release, contact us (toll-free 1-800-263-1136; 514-283-8300; [STATCAN.infostats-infostats.STATCAN@canada.ca](mailto:STATCAN.infostats-infostats.STATCAN@canada.ca)) or Media Relations (613-951-4636; [STATCAN.mediahotline-ligneinfomedias.STATCAN@canada.ca](mailto:STATCAN.mediahotline-ligneinfomedias.STATCAN@canada.ca)).