

# Students who report using alcohol, cannabis or nicotine at higher risk for mental health disorders, survey shows

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High school students who reported using cannabis, alcohol, or nicotine were more likely to have thoughts about suicide, feel depressed or anxious, have unusual experiences, and exhibit inattention or

hyperactivity, according to recent survey-based study conducted by researchers at Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) and the University of Minnesota.

The study, which is published in *JAMA Pediatrics*, included 2022–2023 [survey results](#) from more than 15,000 high school students across Massachusetts.

"We sought to determine whether [substance use](#) was dose-dependently associated with various psychiatric symptoms in a large sample of high school students, and whether these associations differed depending on the type of substance used," says senior author Randi M. Schuster, Ph.D., an associate professor of psychology in the Department of Psychiatry at MGH and the director of School-Based Research and Program Development within MGH's Center for Addiction Medicine.

Schuster and her colleagues found that [alcohol use](#), [cannabis use](#) and nicotine use were each associated with an increased prevalence of suicidal thoughts as well as depression/anxiety symptoms, psychotic experiences, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder symptoms.

For example, thoughts of suicide were approximately five times more prevalent among [high school students](#) who used substances daily or near daily compared with those who did not.

Increases in psychiatric symptoms were detected even among adolescents with relatively low levels of use. The investigators' findings were replicated when they examined responses from a [national survey](#) conducted in 2021.

"Our study's results highlight the prevalence of psychiatric co-morbidities among young people who use substances, and they lend strong support for the notion that screening, prevention, intervention and

policy efforts need to comprehensively address targets beyond substance use alone," says lead author Brenden Tervo-Clemmens, Ph.D., an assistant professor at the University of Minnesota Medical School.

"Also, these efforts may not need to necessarily be specific to a given substance, but rather reflect the multifaceted mental health needs of all adolescents who use substances."

Schuster is currently heading up a study that will survey individual students over time to provide additional insights into the relationship and timing of substance use and psychiatric symptoms, which could help investigators develop interventions to better safeguard adolescents' mental health.

Additional authors include Jodi M. Gilman, Ph.D.; A. Eden Evins, MD; Kate H. Bentley, Ph.D.; Matthew K. Nock, Ph.D.; and Jordan W. Smoller, MD.

**More information:** Substance Use, Suicidal Thoughts, and Psychiatric Comorbidities Among High School Students, *JAMA Pediatrics* (2024). DOI: [10.1001/jamapediatrics.2023.6263](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2023.6263)

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