

SUBSTANCE USE AND BEYOND: UNDERSTANDING YOUTH RISK BEHAVIORS IN GEORGIA

Substance use and behavioral health challenges continue to shape the well-being of Georgia's youth. Insights from the 2024 Georgia Student Health Survey (GSHS) reveal the patterns, risks, and realities facing Georgia's 6th through 12th graders today, from alcohol and vaping to disordered eating and gambling.

What Substances Georgia's Youth are Using

Alcohol, marijuana, and vaping products top the list of substances used by Georgia's youth.¹ In the 30 days before they took the GSHS, thousands of Georgia middle and high school students reported substance use:²

- **43,873 (6%)** drank **alcohol**
- **35,136 (5%)** smoked **marijuana**
- **38,996 (5%)** vaped **nicotine products**

What is a substance use disorder?

A substance use disorder (SUD) occurs when repeated substance use leads to significant impairment and disrupts school, relationships, or health.³

Common Substances and Their Effects

Substance	Type	How It's Consumed	Health Impact
 Alcohol	Depressant	In beverages	Impairs brain function; weakens immune system; increases risk of cancer, heart and liver disease, and risky behavior ^{4, 5}
 Cocaine	Stimulant	Snorted, smoked, or injected	Increases heart rate and alertness; raises risk of anxiety, psychosis, and infectious disease ^{6, 7}
 Marijuana*	Psychoactive	Smoked or eaten	Affects memory, coordination, and learning; linked to anxiety and impaired mental health ^{8, 9}
 Opioids	Pain relievers, depressants, & stimulants	Swallowed or injected	Slows breathing; causes drowsiness, nausea, and confusion; can be fatal in overdose ^{10, 11}
 Tobacco	Stimulant	Smoked, snorted, chewed, or vaporized	Damages lungs and heart; increases risk of chronic disease and cancer ^{12, 13}

*Legislation passed in 2017 and 2018 that expanded the conditions for which cannabis oil can be prescribed to include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), intractable pain, Tourette's syndrome, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Epidermolysis bullosa, Alzheimer's disease, human immunodeficiency syndrome, autoimmune disease, and peripheral neuropathy.



Non-substance Disorders Affecting Georgia's Youth

In the 30 days prior to taking the GSHS, **1 in 5** Georgia students reported disordered eating behaviors.¹⁴

- **123,477 (20%)** 6th through 12th graders reported forced vomiting, using laxatives, or avoiding food in order to lose weight. Of those who reported this behavior,
 - **27%** were **female**
 - **12%** were **male**

What is a non-substance disorder?

Non-substance disorders are behavioral addictions. Compulsions like gambling or disordered eating can cause serious emotional, social, and physical harm.¹⁵

Common Non-Substance Disorders and Their Effects

<i>Disorder</i>	<i>What It Is</i>	<i>Health Impact</i>
Pathological Gambling	Persistent, uncontrollable betting that disrupts school, finances, and/or relationships	Loss of money or basic needs, increased stress, damaged relationships, higher risk for crime or substance use
Disordered Eating	Severe disturbances in eating behavior or body image (e.g., anorexia-nervosa, bulimia-nervosa, binge-eating). ¹⁶ Common behaviors include extreme restriction of food, binge-purge cycles, fasting, excessive exercise, or use of diuretics and laxatives to restrict absorption. ¹⁷	Malnutrition, heart issues, and potentially life-threatening complications ¹⁸



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