

ACTIVITY: SUBSTANCE USE SORT

Grade Levels: 9–12

Activity Overview:

Students explore how substance use exists on a spectrum and work together to sort substance use behaviour cards, along the spectrum.

Materials:

- [Substance Use Spectrum Handout](#) (one per student)
- Substance Use Behaviour Card Decks (one deck per group of 5 students)
 - Options:
 - [Grades 9–12 Cannabis Deck](#)
 - [Other Substance Booster Pack](#)
- Chart paper (one per group of five students)
- Markers (a variety of colours to share)



Activity Description

Part 1

- Prepare, print and cut apart the *Substance Use Behaviour Card Decks* you want to use for the activity. You should have one deck per group.
- Inform students that this activity will help them to think about substance use, how it is connected to our health and explore different types of substance use behaviour. Share with students that substance use exists on a spectrum:
 - **Non-Use:** Not using substances like alcohol or other drugs.
 - **Beneficial Use:** Use that can have positive health, social or spiritual effects, such as taking medication as prescribed by a healthcare provider or ceremonial use of tobacco.
 - **Lower-Risk Use:** Use that doesn't have a major negative impact on a person's health or well-being or on their family, friends and others, such as consuming low amounts of substances occasionally, avoiding high-THC cannabis products, and following Canada's Guidance on Alcohol and Health.
 - **Higher-Risk Use:** Use that has a harmful and negative impact on a person's health or well-being or on their family, friends and others. This might involve using more of a substance more often, binge drinking, using different substances at the same time and risky behaviour like impaired driving.
 - **Addiction (Substance Use Disorder):** When someone cannot stop using drugs, commercial tobacco, or alcohol even if they want to or they are experiencing a significant negative impact on aspects of their life such as missing school, missing social groups/clubs or a reduction in sport performance.

Part 2

- Display the [Substance Use Spectrum](#) where everyone can see it.
- Divide students into groups of five or six. Each group gets a piece of chart paper and markers and takes five minutes to draw their own simple substance use spectrum across the length of the page: non-use; beneficial use; lower-risk use; higher-risk use; addiction (substance use disorder).
- When the spectrums are complete, give each group a deck of *Substance Use Behaviour Cards*. Explain the following:
 - Your goal is to work as a team to place every card somewhere along your substance use spectrum.
 - Read the behaviour on the card and decide as a group where on the spectrum it belongs. Move on to the next card.
 - You can move the cards around the spectrum throughout the discussion until you have placed all the cards and finalized your choices.
 - Once all your cards are placed, take a gallery walk around the room as a group and look at other teams' choices.
 - As a full class, discuss what similarities and differences you see between the groups' decisions and have students share some of the considerations behind where they placed the cards on the spectrum.
 - Try a reshuffle activity to consider different factors that affect risk levels. Ask each group to return to their substance use spectrum and explain that you are going to read out a few scenarios. After each scenario, students have three minutes to discuss as a group if and how they would move the placement of cards on the spectrum.
 - Scenario 1: The person is pregnant
 - Scenario 2: The person has a history of mental illness
 - Scenario 3: The person is on medication for anxiety
 - Share the [Substance Use Spectrum Handout](#) and finish your discussion with a summary of the points included in the handout.

Want to turn up the team building challenge?

- **Assigned Cards:** Every group member has cards assigned to them and they can only touch their own card while making decisions as a group. This approach promotes collaboration and ensures everyone participates.
- **Time Crunch:** Give groups five minutes to place all the cards. This can add excitement and encourage students to speak up but can also lead to some students taking over decision-making to complete the task efficiently.

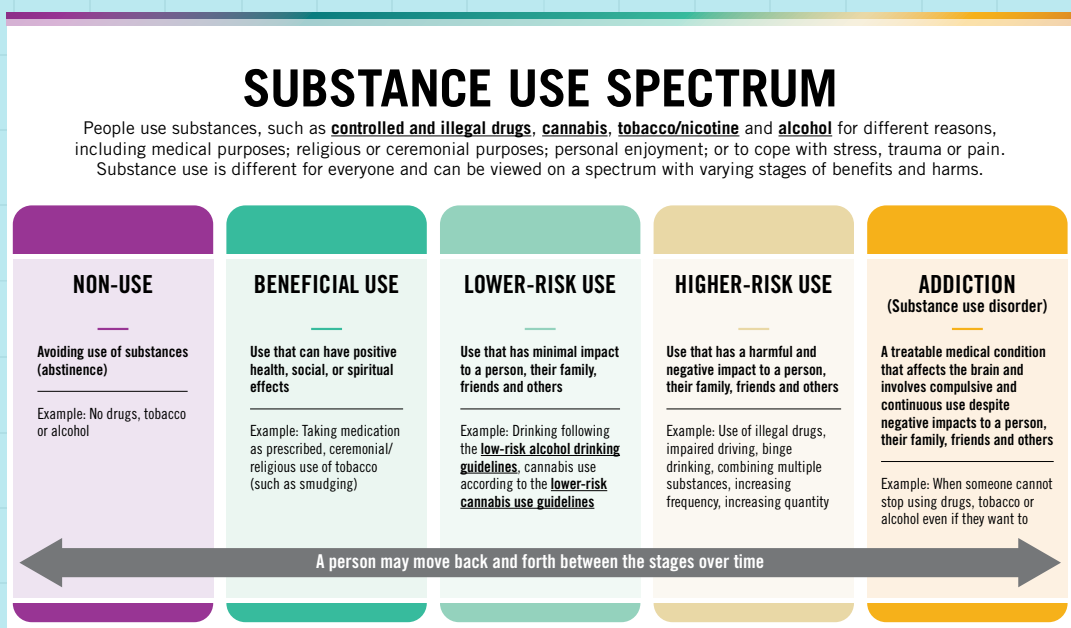


Image: Infographic from [Substance Use Spectrum](#)



Inclusion Considerations

- **Content:** Acknowledge that some people don't use substances like alcohol for religious or cultural reasons; some groups have to deal with stereotypes regarding substance use.
- **Activity Format:** If barriers to mobility are present, invite students to briefly present their spectrums to the class rather than do the gallery walk.



Reflection Questions

1. When do you think a substance like cannabis might become harmful for a person?
2. What are some signs that a person is moving from lower-risk to higher-risk substance/cannabis use?
3. If you noticed a friend was moving to higher-risk use of a substance like cannabis, how would you respond?
4. Does low- and high-risk substance use look the same for everyone? Why or why not?

A person
doesn't
use any
cannabis

A person with
epilepsy uses
medication
containing
cannabis
authorized by a
doctor to help
reduce seizures

A patient with
cancer uses
a cannabis
product under
guidance from
their doctor to
reduce nausea
during treatment

A person waits
until they are
over 19 to
try cannabis
and tries a
low-potency
product in a
safe setting

A person uses
a small amount
of cannabis
and doesn't
use any other
substances at
the same time

A person
regularly uses
high-THC
cannabis and
has trouble
remembering
things or
focusing

A person starts
to vomit regularly
and have
stomach pain,
and it's related
to their cannabis
use (cannabinoid
hyperemesis
syndrome [CHS])

A person uses
cannabis
multiple times
a day and feels
anxious, irritable
or depressed
without it

A person keeps
using cannabis
when they wish
they could stop
because they
have lost friends
due to their
use and got in
trouble at work
for their use

A person
doesn't
drink any
alcohol

Tobacco is used
in a traditional
Indigenous
ceremony to
show respect,
offer prayers,
or connect with
culture and
spirituality

A person
recovering from
surgery takes
prescribed
opioids for a
short time to
manage pain,
as directed by
their doctor

Someone
occasionally
uses low
amounts of
caffeine (like
coffee or energy
drinks) without
it affecting their
sleep or mood

An adult has one
or two standard
drinks of alcohol
over the course of
a meal, does not
drive afterward,
do dangerous
physical activity like
swimming, and is
not responsible for
others or making
important decisions

A person
takes
someone
else's ADHD
pills (not
prescribed
to them)

A person
is playing
drinking
games and
binge drinking,
getting over
intoxicated

Someone lies
or steals to
get alcohol,
cigarettes,
cannabis or
other drugs

A person
feels sick or
anxious when
they don't use
a substance
and can't stop
thinking
about it