**ON THESE PAGES, please provide notation that shows evidence of your thinking, questioning and connecting WHILE you read (text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world), along with your best attempts at figuring out unknown words in context. Then, complete the Food for Thought section at the end.**

**Why Canada needs a new alcohol strategy**

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http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/health-and-fitness/health/alongside-marijuana-debate-new-alcohol-strategy-needed/article26633423/

Marijuana continues to pop up during this (epically long) federal election campaign, with each party offering a different solution to keep the drug out of the hands of young people.

It’s an important debate that essentially boils down to whether you think the current system – under which Canadian youth have become the top users of marijuana compared with their peers in the rest of the developed world – is working or if you believe, like a growing segment of the medical community, that change is needed.

It’s ironic so many people are enraged over the public health consequences of marijuana policy, yet pay little attention to another harmful substance that poses a far greater threat to Canadians.

It is alcohol – not marijuana, not prescription drugs, not even cigarettes – that attracts the largest number of young people. According to a 2012-13 Health Canada survey, 41 per cent of Grade 7 to Grade 12 students said they drank alcohol at least once in the previous year, compared with 19 per cent who had tried marijuana and 13 per cent who had smoked a cigarette. Of those who drank, 30 per cent binged – defined as five or more drinks at a single sitting – at least once. On average, Canadian young people have their first drink at the age of 13.

A list of the risks alcohol poses to developing bodies and brains could take up the rest of this page, but consider among them drunk driving, increased risk of alcoholism, learning and memory impairments, sexual assault and suicide.

And it doesn’t stop there. Too many adults are drinking harmful amounts of alcohol, putting them at risk for heart disease, cancer, family and work problems, liver disease … the list goes on.

Statistics Canada says that nearly 20 per cent of Canadians are heavy drinkers. According to a 2013 Health Canada survey, one in four Canadians exceeds national safe-drinking guidelines, increasing the chances of injuries, overdoses, certain types of cancer and liver problems. Many of us likely don’t realize we are drinking unsafe amounts, as we underestimate how much we drink by up to 75 per cent, according to a study published last year by researchers at the Centre for Addictions Research of B.C. at the University of Victoria.

Tellingly, the Health Canada survey also found that only 26 per cent of Canadians 15 and older had any idea we even have drinking guidelines.

That isn’t all that surprising when you consider that up until 2011, Canada didn’t have any national guidance on how to consume alcohol safely. In part, that reflects the challenge of setting drinking thresholds. How many drinks a day can be considered “safe”? How dangerous is it to go beyond those limits?

But more than anything, it reflects the state of the conversation around alcohol in Canada. Or the lack thereof.

A 2013 report from Toronto’s Centre for Addiction and Mental Health identified alcohol as one of the biggest health risks facing the country and said a “system-level response” is urgently needed to address the mounting toll it takes in terms of injury, disease and death, as well as the subsequent cost to the health-care system.

The report laments the fact that health-prevention strategies relating to alcohol are mostly absent in Canada and that the conversation rarely even comes up, save for “brief appearances in the media” when there is a drinking-and-driving tragedy. People across Canada have been gripped by one such tragedy in the past week, following the deaths of three Brampton, Ont., children and their grandfather after a collision with a suspected drunk driver.

A few weeks ago, CAMH and a coalition of health organizations issued a new call for an alcohol strategy in Ontario, ahead of the province’s plans to make beer more accessible in grocery stores. Some of their proposed solutions include responsible pricing, limits on where alcohol is sold and restrictions on advertising.

Anyone doubting the effectiveness of those strategies should look no further than the dramatic drop in smoking rates following the introduction of public education campaigns, higher prices, bans on retail displays and graphic warning labels. In 1965, about half of Canadians over 15 smoked. In 2013, 15 per cent of Canadian adults were smokers.

Alcohol can be enjoyed in moderation – up to a glass of red wine a day can even boost heart health. But far too few of us are aware of what moderation even means. It’s time to face facts: We have a drinking problem, and we need to do something about it.

**FOOD FOR THOUGHT:**

1. **From your own experiences as a teenager in Canada, what strategies have YOU seen in public or in schools to help curb or to provide information about alcohol consumption? (Applying)**
2. **Do you agree with the writer of this article, that alcohol use and abuse is a much bigger problem than drug use or abuse? Explain your answer clearly, please. (Evaluating)**
3. **The decriminalization of marijuana is a hot button topic in the current election. If the information provided in this article is true, then why isn’t an improved “alcohol strategy” an issue? (Analyzing/Evaluating)**