

# COMPASS

## Larimer County, we have a

# PROBLEM

Survey shows concerning alcohol, pot use

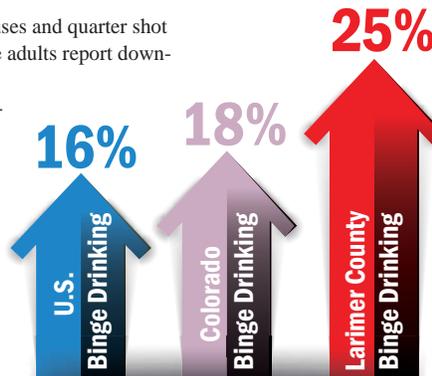


by julie estlick

Larimer County's reputation as a health-conscious community is being threatened by an apparent rise in heavy drinking and a rapid increase in marijuana use among men and women across several age groups and income levels.

### County leads in heavy drinking

It's not just the image of keg parties at frat houses and quarter shot night at college bars. More and more middle-age adults report downing enough alcohol in a week to be considered heavy drinkers. The Health District's 2016 Community Health Survey revealed that 11 percent of adults age 40-64 said they consumed 15 or more drinks in a week for men, and 8 or more drinks for women. Overall, 10 percent of all respondents (18 and older) met the definition of heavy drinkers. Although measured slightly differently than the Community Health Survey, only 5 percent of legal drinkers in the U.S. report that level of consumption in a week, and 6 percent of Coloradans.\* These numbers are not an anomaly; a clear trend has also emerged toward fewer people in Larimer County abstaining from drinking alcohol and more individuals drinking three or more beverages in one sitting in surveys reaching back to 2004.



Binge drinking is defined as 5 or more drinks for men and 4 or more for women on one occasion.

Data from the Health District's 2016 Community Health Survey and the 2015 U.S. Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System.

The latest Community Health Survey also found that almost 2 out of 3 adults between the age of 18 and 39 reported having three drinks or more at one time—enough for most men or women to probably be impaired—and 2 out of 5 said they had at least one “binge” drinking episode in the past month. Binge drinking is defined by experts as four or more drinks for women and five or more for men on one occasion. Among all age groups, 25 percent surveyed said they had binged in the last 30 days. The state average for binge drinking is 18 percent and the national average is 16 percent, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.\*

You may think, sure, on girls nights out I might have a couple of shots too many and a glass or two of wine with dinner, but what's the harm in blowing off steam? There could be several. For one thing, a National Cancer Institute study suggests that the more alcohol you drink regularly,

the higher your risk of developing cancer. In November, a group of top

▶ continued on page 6

<p><b>I N S I D E</b></p>	<p>Soup season is here Cozy up with a bowl</p> <p><b>2</b></p>	<p>Anxiety It is treatable</p> <p><b>3</b></p>	<p>Healing Warriors Pain relief without drugs</p> <p><b>4</b></p>	<p>Tested for Hep C? Test recommended for baby boomers</p> <p><b>5</b></p>	<p>Health District news Board approves 2018 budget</p> <p>Open Enrollment for health insurance ends Jan. 12</p> <p>Key grant from Community Health Foundation</p> <p>Advance Care Planning Team helps thousands</p> <p><b>7</b></p>
---	--	--	---	--	---

U.S. cancer doctors issued a statement asking people to drink less, citing evidence that even a single glass of wine or one beer a day might increase the risk of developing breast cancer.

Researchers also warn that the good effects of low to moderate drinking—like a lower risk of heart attack and stroke—could be canceled out by bouts of heavier drinking.

“For some people, the fact that the alcohol or marijuana they use is legal and being widely and visibly used by others in the community can be an argument they use to explain that it is okay,” says Brooke Lee, director of adult and access services for SummitStone Health Partners, the area’s largest provider of specialized behavioral health treatment. “But they can be developing a serious problem.” SummitStone surveys new substance use clients at admission and the majority of their clients seek help for alcohol use disorders, followed by marijuana and methamphetamines (comparable numbers), and then opioids, Lee notes.

### Problem drinking red flags

How can you tell if your drinking is really a problem that needs to be addressed?

“Through education, people can learn to recognize red flags,” Lee says. “For example, if you are visiting breweries and feeling a loss of control of how many beers you consume, are spending more money than intended, having conflicts with loved ones due to intoxication, or having trouble going to work the next day, these are all signs that you may have an alcohol use disorder.”

Does this mean you have to give up drinking altogether? Not always, says Ann Noonan, director of Substance Use Disorders Centers for Excellence at Mental Health Partners in Longmont and a member of the Health District’s Community Impact Team.

“There is a mistaken belief that there is nothing to be done about substance abuse problems until the person has ‘hit bottom’,” Noonan says. “Actually, advice from a medical professional to reduce levels of drinking, even by just a drink or two a week, can significantly reduce the development of more serious problems later. And paying attention to the alcohol content of alcohol servings, spacing drinks, and even reducing consumption by just a few drinks a week can be significant.”

But some people may need professional help to tackle a dependency, Noonan adds. And, seeking help early for substance use problems may head off developing serious dependence on substances.

Ignoring the problem and letting it get out of hand can impact not only your health and your relationships, but public safety. Fights that lead to physical injury or property damage, motor vehicle accidents, and domestic violence are just some of the possible outcomes when someone is drunk.

Interim Fort Collins Police Chief Terry Jones, who took over the department last May, says a significant number of calls that happen overnight include involvement with alcohol or narcotic drugs. “When people are high or intoxicated, there is a good chance we’ll be called. A drunken person gets angry and starts yelling in the bar or at home, people get scared,” he says. “Or somebody is high and not behaving right, law enforcement is more than likely going to be notified.”

### Marijuana use escalates

Alcohol isn’t the only substance we’re overindulging in. It’s perhaps not a big surprise that more people would try marijuana once it was legalized for retail sale in 2014; however the numbers jumped from 17 percent in 2013 to 32 percent in 2016 among those adults who say they used within the past year. Of those users, 36 percent report using marijuana more than 50 times over the past 12 months.

There was a 10 percent drop in the number who report they have “never tried marijuana in their lives,” although it is possible that legalization may

have led some individuals to be more truthful than in prior surveys.

It’s important to remember that marijuana addiction is a real disorder that occurs in approximately 9 percent of those who regularly use marijuana, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse. To place marijuana dependence in the context of other drugs, according to the 2013 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, of the 6.9 million Americans who abused illicit drugs or were dependent on them, 4.2 million were marijuana users. (Colorado was the first state to legalize recreational pot and sales began in 2014.)

In Larimer County, the legalization of marijuana has caused an interesting treatment dilemma, SummitStone’s Lee says. “It’s easier for clients to argue that it’s okay to continue smoking pot since Colorado has legalized it, which some clients perceive as a determination that it is harmless. We focus on teaching them about the impact of use and let them decide for themselves if their use is causing problems in their life.”

While more research needs to be done on the physical and psychological effects of marijuana, there are some potential health risks. Marijuana use among young adults is associated with impaired learning and increases in psychotic symptoms. Associations with memory impairment, acute psychotic symptoms, and development of psychotic disorders among heavy users have been found in adults.

Like alcohol, marijuana overuse is also linked to safety issues. “Generally, people on marijuana are more mellow (than a drunk person) when talking to police, but there are residual impacts that are catastrophic, like impaired driving,” says Jones.

The effects of marijuana use are compounded by drinking alcohol, so combining the two can seriously heighten risks, and particularly the risk of impaired driving.

### Addiction is a brain disease

For some users, recreational alcohol and marijuana use can lead to a dependency on the drugs, otherwise known as addiction. Unfortunately, the culture in the U.S. has seen addiction as a moral failing for far too long. In fact, alcoholism and drug addiction are brain diseases that require treatment and time to heal just like any other physical ailment, Lee emphasizes.

“Recent scientific evidence shows that addiction is not a choice or a weakness,” she says. “In reality, an addictive disorder changes the brain and makes it difficult for the person to make changes they may desperately want to make.”

For those whose use leads to an addiction, treatment (which may include medication) can help get the disorder under control. 

*\*State and federal data is collected by the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) administered by the CDC, which uses an interviewer-led phone survey, while the Health District’s is a mail survey of 2,000 to 3,000 adult residents conducted every three years, so some caution is needed in comparisons. The fall 2016 Health District survey included 2,279 adults in Larimer County.*



If you think you have a substance use problem, reach out to a professional.

**Connections** provides assistance to connect people to the help they need. Services include referrals to local treatment programs and support groups, and help navigating treatment options

and insurance. 525 W. Oak St., Fort Collins (inside SummitStone Health Partners building), 970-221-5551, [mentalhealthconnections.org](http://mentalhealthconnections.org).

If it’s a crisis, **SummitStone Health Partners’ 24/7 Walk-In Crisis Center**, 1217 Riverside Ave., Fort Collins, 970-494-4200, [summitstonehealth.org](http://summitstonehealth.org).