

Why it's dumb to drink when you're a teenager

Introduction

Drinking alcohol is often looked upon as being cool, but in reality it is not. There are a lot of reasons why it is dumb to drink alcohol when you are a teenager but one of the most important ones is that it makes you dumb. Alcohol affects the brains of teenagers differently from the way it affects adults—it actually stops your brain developing normally!

How does alcohol affect your brain?

When you become a teenager your body changes and this includes the development of your brain. Your brain keeps maturing until you are about 20 years old. That's why drinking alcohol affects young people more than adults and the damage can be permanent.

Drinking alcohol can damage two parts of the brain: the frontal lobe and the hippocampus. These parts of the brain are involved in memory and emotions, and damage to them could be responsible for:

- memory problems
- dependence ("addiction")
- inability to learn
- depression
- problems with verbal skills.

Alcohol affects each person differently. It takes less alcohol and less time to damage a teenager's hippocampus than it takes to damage a fully mature one.

Alcohol affects memory

Alcohol stops you learning and remembering things. Regularly using alcohol slows down systems in your brain that are important for storing new information and makes it difficult for you to remember what you learn. Drinking alcohol when you are young can have

a permanent effect on your ability to learn and remember things.

Dependence

The changes that occur to the brain when you're a teenager make you more vulnerable to the addictive actions of drugs. Teenagers who start drinking before they are aged 15 are five times more likely to become dependent on it, compared to someone who doesn't start drinking until the age of 21.

Depression

Teenagers who binge drink are also much more likely to suffer major depression than those who don't have an alcohol problem. Binge drinking is drinking heavily over a short period of time or drinking continuously over a number of days or weeks.

Dealing with peer pressure

Being a teenager is hard and you can experience a lot of pressure to do things because your friends are doing them. Just remember that it is OK to say no to alcohol. Here are some things you can say or do when you are under pressure to drink.

What to say:

- No thanks.
- I don't feel like it.
- Alcohol is not my thing.

What to do:

- "Lose" unwanted drinks that are given to you. For example, set them down and later walk away.
- Try to stay away from people who give you a hard time about not drinking.

Saying "no" gets easier the more you do it.

What should you do?

Now that you know all the damage alcohol can do to you, why would you do it? Drinking can put you in situations that can be dangerous or embarrassing and it can ruin your chance for success in the future.

Where to get help

If you are concerned about alcohol or know someone that you think may have a problem, the first step to getting help is finding someone you can talk to:

- a friend or family member
- a teacher at school
- your local GP
- Kids Help Line, <http://www.kidshelp.com.au/>
tel. 1800 1800;
Online web counselling for teenagers
- Youth Substance Abuse Service,
<http://www.ysas.org.au/>
tel.: 1800 014 446
24-hour counselling, support and referral for
12–21-year-olds
- Somazone, www.somazone.com.au