



The Developing Brain: Why Alcohol Matters



Our brains continue to develop into our mid-20s, and the teenage years mark an especially critical time for growth and adjustment. During this time, brain connections are being strengthened and refined, shaping how young people think, learn and respond to the world around them. The prefrontal cortex — which is responsible for decision-making and impulse control — is still maturing, and the brain's reward system is highly active. Risky behaviors, such as underage alcohol use, increase the likelihood of long-term changes to the developing brain.

How does alcohol impact brain development?

- **Memory and Learning:** Alcohol can interfere with the functions of the hippocampus, which can make it harder for teens to retain new information, have long-term impacts on memory and lead to negative school performance.
- **Decision Making:** With the prefrontal cortex still in development, alcohol use can increase impulsive choices, increase risky behaviors (such as unsafe driving) and lower a teen's ability to fully think through their decisions and the matching consequences.
- **Increased Risk of Addiction:** When teens use alcohol, they are more likely to develop substance use issues later in life. Developing brains are more susceptible to becoming dependent on substances, increasing the risk for alcohol use disorder.
- **Mental Health Impacts:** Alcohol use by teens can lead to increased anxiety, depression, mood swings and irritability, which also increases their risk for self-harm.

What are the long-term impacts?

- Increased chance of developing a substance use disorder
- Long-term and permanent changes to the brain's structure and functionality
- Negative impacts on school performance, which can have lifelong repercussions
- Increased development and regularity of mental health struggles

Along with long-term risks, alcohol use also has short-term risks, including blackouts, alcohol poisoning, injuries, accidents and interpersonal conflicts.

How to prevent underage alcohol use?

- **Start the conversation early!** Talk to the young people in your life about alcohol use in honest and open ways. Focus on sharing real information — without scare tactics — to ensure they are open to listening and hearing you.
- **Ensure teens have trusted adults in their lives.** Teens are more likely to seek and find support when they have trusted adults in their lives. A trusted adult can be a parent or family member, but could also be a coach, a faith leader or a teacher. Encouraging teens to participate in positive activities can help support them in finding trusted adults.
- **Set clear boundaries.** Create and maintain clear boundaries and expectations around alcohol use. Remember that teens are looking to the adults in their lives to learn about the world and how to behave. Model the behavior you want the youth in your life to follow!

Reminder: While alcohol use is often depicted in fun or carefree ways, it can have serious consequences. Teen alcohol use can change the brain in long-term and short-term ways, leading to serious, lifelong impacts.

If you are 18+ years old and would like support in managing your alcohol use, contact IFPR's Peer Recovery Program at **848-303-0008** to speak with a certified recovery specialist. Recovery specialists can help you address your use of substances, build healthier coping skills and cultivate a supportive community.