

Young people are bombarded with messaging about drugs through advertisements, social media, music and television. Typically, media portrays drug use positively, often glamorizing it, without showing the potential long-term consequences. To give young people a more accurate understanding, and to provide them with the information they will need to make healthy decisions, the trusted adults in their lives must step up and have difficult conversations. This newsletter will provide the latest science on the developing teen brain, the impact of early drug use on brain development and provide tips for substance use prevention and suggested resources.

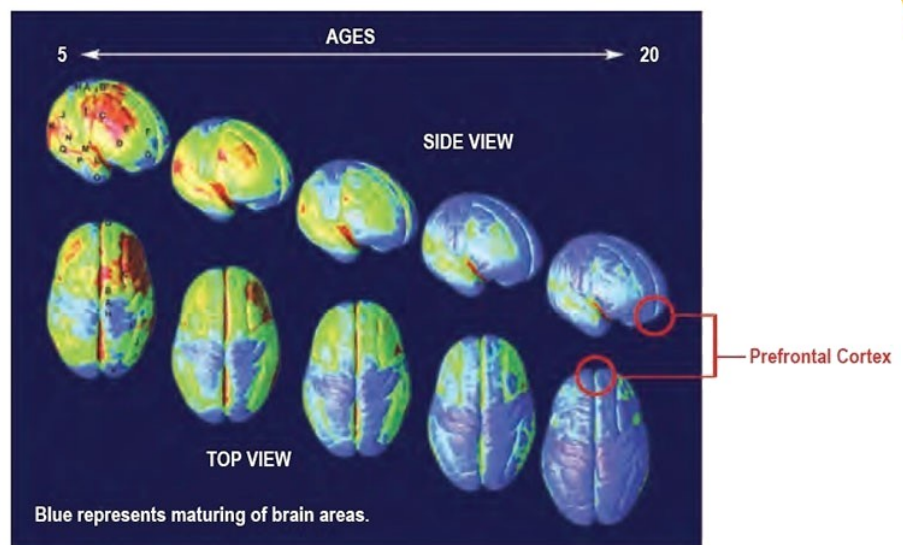
What is Unique About a Teenager's Developing Brain?

Due to the significant neurological changes that are taking place during adolescence, early initiation of substance use does carry greater risks. A person who begins using drugs or alcohol in their early teens is more likely to develop a substance use disorder. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), the majority of people who develop a substance use disorder started using before the age of 18 and developed this disorder by age 20. A person who begins using in their early teens is particularly at risk. For example, over 15% of people who start drinking by age 14 develop alcohol use disorder, compared to just over 2% of those who wait until they are 21 or older.

Adolescence is a crucial time for human brain development. More changes occur to the brain during adolescence than at any other time in life, other than years 0-3. During adolescence, brain cells and connections that are used the least are pruned away, while those that are engaged with the most are strengthened. The teenage brain has great plasticity, which makes it an ideal time for learning and retaining knowledge that is emphasized or reinforced.

In addition to these developmental changes during adolescence, the different areas of the brain develop unevenly over time, leaving a young people with a highly developed limbic system (emotions) and a still developing pre-frontal cortex (decision-making).

The pre-frontal cortex is one of the last areas of the brain to mature, not until the mid to late 20s. This is the area that is responsible for skills like planning, prioritizing, problem-solving and self-control. Since these skills are still developing, a young person is more likely to engage in risky behaviors without thinking through the potential consequences of their actions.



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Chicago High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas

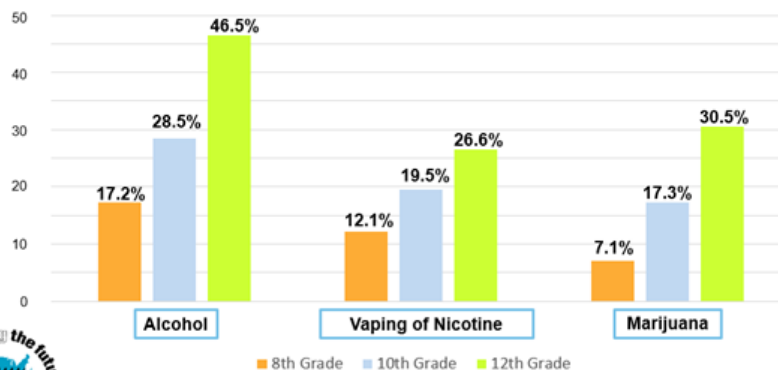
How Common is Underage Substance Use?

Young people tend to overestimate the number of people their age that have tried or regularly use drugs or alcohol. It is important to remind them that the majority of people their age are NOT using. This chart shows data from the 2021 Monitoring the Future survey, an annual survey of 8th, 10th and 12th grade students regarding substance use. This survey is conducted by researchers at the University of Michigan and is funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), part of the National Institutes of Health.



Teen Drug Use Trends

(Use within the last year)



What are some tips for substance use prevention?



Establish Clear Rules and Stick to Them - Setting specific rules around substance use is the foundation of the prevention effort for parents. Consistency in enforcing the rules with consequences is critical.



Promote Healthy Activities - Physical activities, community activities, part-time jobs, etc. all help fight off "I'm bored." The adolescent brain craves novelty. Help the adolescent in your life find that novelty in new and healthy ways.



Set the Example - What you do is just as important, if not more important, than what you say. Model healthy coping strategies, drink in moderation, establish a designated driver and follow hosting laws.



Keep Track of Drugs - For young people the most common source of alcohol and prescription drugs is parents. Accessibility to these substances is a real concern.



Stay Connected - Keep the lines of communication open and foster the parent-child relationship. Eat meals together, limit screen use, take an interest in their interests and get to know their friends.



Be the Excuse - Prepare your child for potential peer pressure situations. Let them know that they can use you as an excuse to not participate. Consider setting up a plan or a code they can text you when they want to leave a situation.



Continue to Educate Yourself - Seek out reputable sources of information and don't just rely on personal experience. Please use the resources posted in this newsletter to help you.

Resources to use with your teen:

NIDA: Great video explaining the impact of substance use on the developing brain. [CLICK HERE](#)

CANDOR HEALTH EDUCATION:

- Drug Education Portal - Resources (animations, graphic novels, a video game) on specific drugs and their impact. [CLICK HERE](#)
- Family Resources: Curated parent resources for specific drugs, as well as how to communicate with young people about drugs. [CLICK HERE](#)

NIH - Activities and information designed specifically for teens on drug use and its effects. [CLICK HERE.](#)