

Raising Healthy Teens



Dear Parents,

Young people today deal with a great deal of academic and social stress. Technology, high pressure academic expectations, competitive sports and the daily bombardment of social media are just some of the stressors facing teens today. Learning how to cope with pressure and scheduling downtime becomes especially important as teenagers head into high school.

The summer between eighth grade and high school is often when kids are faced with difficult choices. Their growing desire for independence can lead to increased involvement in high-risk behaviors and a greater reliance on their peers. The rules and boundaries you set become an important safety net for them. While they seem to push you away, your teen secretly needs you more than ever.

Today's teens must make decisions about alcohol and drug use that no previous generation has had to make. Education and parental support will help guide them toward a healthy and productive future. It's important to talk early and often to your teen about substance abuse and mental health issues. The following facts can help guide you in these discussions.

FACT ONE:

50% of mental illness begins by age 14 and 75% begins by age 24.¹

Mental health issues include disorders that affect your mood, thinking and behavior. Unfortunately, there can be long delays, sometimes decades, between when symptoms of mental health issues first appear and when people get help. Studies show that early treatment can make a big difference for successful management and recovery. Encourage family members to have open and honest conversations about their emotional health — just as they do about their physical health — from a young age. If you are concerned about your child's behavior, consult with your health care provider. Children with untreated mental health symptoms are more likely to try alcohol and other drugs as a way of self-medicating.

FACT TWO:

90% of addictions begin in the teen years.²

A young person's brain is a work in progress. It makes them excellent creative thinkers, but they are not yet fully able to comprehend the consequences of their actions. (It's really not their fault!) In fact, a young person's brain is completing some very important development during adolescence and well into young adulthood. Alcohol, tobacco and other drugs interfere with this development — and the same circuitry that makes our kids want to explore new things also makes them much more susceptible to addiction. It also makes it much more difficult for them to recover from substance abuse.

It's important that you stay involved in your teen's life. Get to know their friends, and know that they are appropriately supervised. Teens take their cues from the adults in their life, so it's important to be a good role model when it comes to drinking alcohol, taking medicine and coping with stress. Show them you care about them enough to even let them be mad at you sometimes! Staying consistent shows them that you really care.

FACT THREE:

A young person's body cannot cope with alcohol the same way an adult's can.³

Drinking is more harmful to teens than adults because the human brain continues to grow throughout adolescence and well into young adulthood. Drinking alcohol during this time can damage short- and long-term brain growth, and that damage can be permanent. It is not just heavy drinking that can impact young people—young people who drink half as much alcohol as adults can still suffer the same negative effects. Teens are more likely to suffer blackouts, memory loss and alcohol poisoning from drinking, as well as cause damage to their ability to remember things in the future. All parts of the growing brain are impacted negatively by alcohol, but the memory function is especially hard hit.

Adolescent drinkers perform worse in school, are more likely to fall behind and have an increased risk of social problems, depression, suicidal thoughts and violence.⁴

Also, because the brain (specifically, the regulation of the brain through serotonin, which provides mood balance and impulse control) becomes used to the use of alcohol, people who begin drinking in their teens are not only at greater risk for developing alcoholism sometime in their lives, they are also at greater risk for developing alcoholism more quickly and at younger ages (especially chronic, relapsing alcoholism).

FACT FOUR:

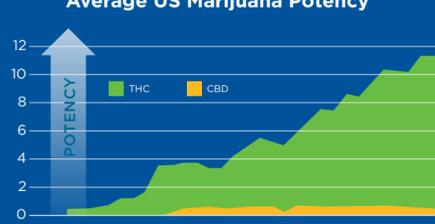
41% of teen marijuana smokers say they began before the age of 15.⁵

According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, studies show that marijuana interferes with attention, motivation, memory and learning. Students who use marijuana regularly (defined as once a week or more) tend to get lower grades and are more likely to drop out of high school than those who don't. Regular marijuana use by teens can lead to an IQ drop of up to eight points.⁶ Even more frightening, a growing number of studies show regular marijuana use actually changes the structure of a teen's brain, specifically the areas dealing with memory and problem solving.⁷

Pro-marijuana groups have been putting out an abundance of marijuana "facts" that make the drug seem harmless. However, over the last few decades, marijuana has evolved tremendously. Sample analysis of marijuana found that the high- inducing chemical tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) has increased in value while the calming and supposedly therapeutic chemical cannabidiol (CBD) has decreased. High THC levels can lead to such side effects as anxiety, aggressive behavior and the inability to eat or sleep, and this chemical increases the chance of becoming addicted. There has also been an increase in emergency room visits by marijuana smokers experiencing toxic reactions leading to mental and physical disturbances such as psychosis, intense anxiety and rapid heart rate.

Marijuana has long been praised as a drug that does not create addiction and thus does not present real health risks. However, recent research has shown the opposite to be true. It has been proven that around 9% of people who use marijuana will become dependent on it. The number increases to about 17% for those who start using as teens.⁸ Addiction to marijuana accounts for about 4.2 million of the 6.9 million Americans dealing with the abuse of illicit drugs.⁹

Average US Marijuana Potency



SOURCE: Mehmedic et al., 2010

FACT FIVE:

1 in 4 teens report prescription drug misuse or abuse.¹⁰

Experts recommend that parents lock up prescription and over-the-counter medications to keep them from being used improperly. The majority of children who abuse prescription drugs and over-the-counter medications report getting them from their family or friends. Therefore, one of the most important things you can do as a parent is to closely monitor drugs prescribed to family members. The most commonly abused medications are OxyContin, Vicodin, Xanax, Valium, Fentanyl, Opana, Concerta, Adderall, Ritalin, Prozac and cough/cold syrups. All medications can be dangerous if taken incorrectly or abused. Safely dispose of any unused medications in your home by using your city's drug drop box or following the methods online for safe home disposal.

According to neurological research, the teen brain is especially vulnerable to addiction, and the powerful opiates frequently prescribed for pain are highly addictive. Discuss this with your health care provider and exercise caution when your teen is taking any drugs prescribed by a doctor. Many teen addictions started after being prescribed pain medication for a sports-related injury or oral surgery.

FACT SIX:

The use of electronic cigarettes (e-cigs) is rising dramatically among middle and high school students.¹¹

Studies are finding that unregulated e-cigs are not a safe alternative to other tobacco products. E-cigs use a battery-powered device to heat a solution that often contains nicotine, along with many other ingredients or "flavorings" known as e-liquid. This produces an aerosol that can be inhaled (vaping).

The common misperception is that e-cigs contain harmless water vapor when in reality they have been found to contain more than 2,000 ingredients, including fluorine, lead and formaldehyde. The safety of these ingredients is unknown when they are heated and inhaled directly into the lungs, bypassing the body's filtration system.

Particles in e-cigs are very small, meaning they can travel deep within the lungs and embed themselves in the tiny air sacs, causing damage. Additionally, e-cigs contain a metal filament used to heat the liquid and create vapor. Over 25 different kinds of metals have been detected in e-cig vapor, some particles small enough to enter the blood and travel to other organs. As e-cigs have only been in use for the last decade, the long-term effects remain unclear. Cigarettes were introduced in the 1880s; but it was not until the Surgeon General's report in 1964 that the link to lung cancer was clearly established.

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4 "The Developing Brain." MADD. Accessed March 2016. www.madd.org.

5 "Partnership Attitude Tracking Study, Teens and Parents." Accessed March 2016. www.drugfree.org.

6 "Marijuana Use & Educational Outcomes." National Institute on Drug Abuse. Accessed March 2016. www.drugabuse.gov.

7 "Marijuana May Hurt the Developing Teen Brain." NPR Health News. March 3, 2014. Accessed March 2016. www.npr.org.

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9 "Is Marijuana Addictive?" National Institute on Drug Abuse. Accessed March 2016. www.drugabuse.gov.

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