



## How Does Alcohol Affect A Teenager's Brain?

**D**id you know that as a teenager your brain may be more easily harmed by alcohol than the brain of an adult?

We now know that the human brain is not fully developed until we are in our twenties. As a teenager, your brain is still changing a lot, and drinking alcohol can damage its growth. If your brain cannot develop properly, you can have serious problems that last into adulthood.

Recent research in the Inuit region of Nunavik shows that alcohol misuse among teens is a problem. Binge drinking (drinking a large quantity of alcohol at one time), especially among teenage girls, is a big concern.<sup>1</sup>

### How Alcohol Affects the Developing Brain

Alcohol can harm a part of your brain that is very important for your memory and learning. If you drink often or heavily, you may have problems remembering information and learning new things, even when you are sober. These problems can continue as an adult.

Drinking beer, hard liquor, wine, rubbing alcohol or any liquid that contains alcohol can lead to changes in the brain so you have trouble concentrating, solving problems and knowing right from wrong. This can cause big problems in school, relationships and all parts of your life.

The brain is what makes us feel good, feel pain, make the right decisions, etc. If alcohol is used to help you feel good, the brain will “forget” how to feel pleasure or be happy on its own.

That is how powerful alcohol is – it interferes with the “happy feeling” chemicals in the brain.

### What Else Can Happen When a Teenager Drinks?

Alcohol poisoning can happen when large amounts of alcohol are consumed in a short period of time. Alcohol poisoning is exactly what it sounds like – the body has become poisoned by the alcohol. Violent vomiting is usually the first symptom of alcohol poisoning. Extreme sleepiness, unconsciousness (blacking out), difficulty breathing, dangerously low blood sugar, seizures, and even death may result.

If you begin drinking at a young age, you may have a much greater risk of becoming dependent on alcohol (addicted, an alcoholic). For example, one survey found that almost half of the people who began drinking before the age of 14 became dependent (addicted) at some point in their lives. Only nine per cent of people (or one out of 10) who began drinking at age 21 or later became addicted.<sup>2</sup>

1 This information came from “Use of alcohol and other drugs by Nunavik youths: key results of the survey”. By C. Plourde et al., Recherche et intervention sur les substances psychoactives – Québec, 2007.

2 This information was adapted from “Teen Drinking Leads to High Risk of Adult Alcoholism.” By R. Thatcher, in Circle Talk, Vol. 2, No. 3, 2006, p. 18-19.

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# Get involved in other activities, find other ways to deal with the stress in your life, look for other ways to have fun.

Using alcohol can affect your judgment and your impulse control. That is why being “impaired” (under the influence of alcohol) makes you more likely to get into a motor vehicle accident, fall or otherwise injure yourself, get into fights and hurt other people, or neglect children in your care. Teens who have been drinking are also more likely to have unprotected sex, which can lead to sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies.

Finally, using alcohol or drugs can make you more depressed and despairing. Many suicide attempts occur when the person has been drinking.

## Why Young People Use Alcohol

Experimenting with alcohol during teen years is common. Some reasons that teens use alcohol and drugs are:

- Curiosity
- To feel good, reduce stress, and relax
- To fit in
- To feel older
- Peer pressure

From a very young age, kids see advertising messages showing nice looking people enjoying life – and alcohol. And because many parents and other adults drink, it can seem OK for young people to drink too.

## Stopping or Cutting Back on Drinking

If you or someone you care about is drinking too much:

- Try to get out of the “habit” of drinking – get involved in other activities, find other ways to deal with the stress in your life, look for other ways to have fun.
- Get involved in activities in your community to reduce alcohol and drug abuse – many teens have made a difference by speaking out.
- If you can't stop or reduce drinking on your own, get help. Talk to a counsellor, health care provider or other adult you trust. An adult who has quit drinking themselves can always be great role models to look up to and get advice from.

## Reducing the Harm that Drinking Causes

Some other ways to reduce the harm drinking can cause are:

- Drink slowly.
- Eat while you drink in order to slow the effect of the alcohol.
- Limit your drinks by spacing them over a longer time.
- Never guzzle or drink quickly.
- Drink only occasionally.
- Don't drive any kind of vehicle while you are drinking or still under the influence.



## FOR MORE INFORMATION:

See our other fact sheets on alcohol and drug use at [www.naho.ca/inuit/resources](http://www.naho.ca/inuit/resources)

There are alcohol and drug awareness programs in many Inuit communities. Contact your health centre, mental wellness program or addictions workers.

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[www.naho.ca/inuit/e/resources/](http://www.naho.ca/inuit/e/resources/)

## OTHER RESOURCES:

**Drinkingfacts.ca** – information, videos and quizzes on alcohol use from the Canadian Public Health Association: <http://drinkingfacts.ca/english>

**ReachOut** – information, videos and stories for youth on alcohol and other drugs: <http://au.reachout.com/find/issues/alcohol-other-drugs/alcohol>

**Keep Control** – First Nations youth take back control from alcohol, the Ontario Public Health Association: [www.keepcontrol.ca/change](http://www.keepcontrol.ca/change)