

Teen Brain Development, Teen Behavior and Preventing Drug Use

On This Page

- 1 [Teen brain development](#)
- 2 [Effects of substance use on the developing brain](#)

Related Reading

[Risk Factors for Addiction](#)

Identify whether your child could be at higher risk for drug or alcohol use, and learn common reasons for why young people may use.

[Is Teen Substance Use Normal?](#)

Understanding why some teens drink or use drugs is a valuable step toward keeping them healthy and safe.

As the parent of a teen, have you found yourself looking at your child, wondering “Why would you do that?” From mood swings to risk taking, “normal” teenage behavior can be confusing and exasperating.

Research reveals that patterns of teen brain development play a significant role in shaping behavior. In other words, there’s a biological reason why teens often act the way they do.

The science of brain development reveals why adolescents are responsive to new experiences and influences, both positive and negative. This makes the teen years a period of great promise, but also of potential risk, especially for addiction. That’s why preventing and delaying substance use during this time is so important to their long-term health.

Teen brain development

accumbens). The prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for impulse control, more reasoned thought and good judgment, develops later.

This pattern of teen brain development helps explain some common traits of teen behavior:

- Difficulty holding back or controlling emotions
- A preference for high-excitement, exploration and new activities
- Inadequate planning and limited judgment
- More risky, impulsive behaviors

With the prefrontal cortex — or one’s ‘voice of reason’ — developing last, it’s easier to understand why teens are so driven by emotion, excitement and short-term reward. This leads to unpredictable — and sometimes risky — behavior.

Unfortunately, developing brains are also more susceptible than the brains of adults to damage from outside influences. This means substance use during the teen years creates a more distinct risk for immediate and lasting harm.

Effects of substance use on the developing brain

Finding ways to satisfy our different needs and desires is a part of life. It’s one of the many skills being fine-tuned during the teen years. But when substances are used to fulfill needs and to feel good, it interferes with the body’s development of its natural reward system.

The brain is made up of billions of nerve cells. Nerves control everything from when the heart beats to what your teen feels, thinks and does. They do this by sending electrical signals throughout the body. The signals get passed from nerve to nerve by chemical messengers called neurotransmitters.

Some of the signals that neurotransmitters send cause feelings of satisfaction or pleasure. These natural rewards are the body’s way of making sure we look for more of what makes us feel good. For example, when we eat something tasty, neurotransmitters tell us we feel good. Seeking more of this pleasure helps to ensure we don’t starve.

The main neurotransmitter of the “feel-good” message is called dopamine. Substances overload the brain with dopamine — they cause the reward system to send too many “feel-good” signals. In response, the brain tries to right the balance by letting fewer of the “feel-good” signals through. As time goes on, the brain needs more and more of the substance to feel its positive effects. This effect is known as tolerance, and it can be especially dangerous in the cases of drugs like heroin and cocaine.

The effects of substances on the brain don’t just stop when the substance wears off. When a person stops taking a substance, dopamine levels remain low for some time. They may feel down, or flat, and unable to experience the natural pleasures in life. The brain will eventually restore the dopamine balance by itself, but it takes time. This can take anywhere from hours, to days, or even months, depending on the substance, the length and amount of use and the person.

Because teenagers have an over-active impulse to seek pleasure and less ability to consider the consequences, they are especially vulnerable when it comes to nicotine, alcohol or drugs. And because the internal reward systems are still being developed, a teen’s ability to bounce back to normal after using substances may be compromised due to how substances affect the brain, making teens more vulnerable than adults to developing addiction.