



Alcohol & other drug use in adolescence

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Adolescence begins at puberty and ends in the early to mid-20s, so we are not just talking about teenagers. It is an important period of development and change; physically and emotionally. Adolescent brains are changing rapidly, making them more affected by what they are experiencing than they would be as adults. One factor that can affect development during this time, is the use of alcohol and other drugs, including cannabis and methamphetamine.

Although these substances differ in their specific effects on the body, including the brain, research indicates there are a number of things in common when it comes to understanding the impact of alcohol and drugs during adolescence.

Rangatahi are affected differently to adults

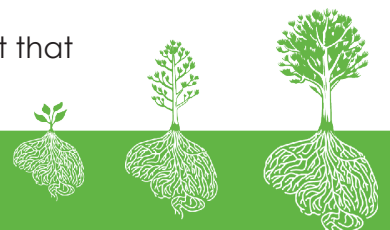
- The adolescent brain is more vulnerable to the effects of substances, including alcohol, cannabis and methamphetamine
- Adolescent drinking and drug use can affect their functioning and brain development, not only at the time but also into adulthood
- If an adolescent and an adult drink the same amount, the adolescent is more likely to be harmed by it

Some rangatahi are more vulnerable than others

Some things that make rangatahi more vulnerable to harm from substance use are:

- A family history of alcohol or other drug issues
- Having experienced maltreatment, including family violence and sexual abuse
- Family history of mental illness (e.g. those with a genetic risk of schizophrenia may be more impacted by cannabis use)

If we know teens are vulnerable, for whatever reason, it's even more important that they wait until after adolescence before using alcohol or other drugs.



Lowering the risk

- Although many rangatahi experiment, particularly with alcohol, and do not develop serious issues, the safest option is to avoid alcohol and drug use during adolescence, while the brain is developing
- For those who've already begun, stopping or cutting down their alcohol or drug use can lower the risks.

The next generation

If rangatahi become hapū, using alcohol or other drugs can also seriously harm their unborn pēpi.

According to research, there is no known safe time, nor safe amount of exposure to alcohol and other recreational drugs during pregnancy.

The role of parents and whānau

- Adolescent attitudes and behaviour towards alcohol and other drugs are influenced by the attitudes and behaviour of adults around them
- The younger tamariki or rangatahi are when they start drinking (even sips of alcohol), the greater the risk of alcohol and other substance issues in adulthood
- Delaying the age at which young people start to drink alcohol reduces the risk of alcohol related problems; every extra year that rangatahi wait, lessens the chance of later problems.

To sum up

- Adolescence is an important period of development, including physical, social, emotional and brain changes
- Experiences that rangatahi have during this time can have lasting effects on their future, in many ways
- Alcohol, and other drug use, during adolescence can be harmful to their development
- Delaying the age at which rangatahi begin drinking lowers the risk of alcohol-related problems.



Suggested reading

Risk & protective factors: A quick snapshot <https://brainwave.org.nz/article/risk-and-protective-factors-a-quick-snapshot/>

Want to know more?

See these articles:

Short term highs, long term risks? <https://brainwave.org.nz/article/short-term-highs-long-term-risks/>

Rethinking teen drinking <https://brainwave.org.nz/article/rethinking-teen-drinking/>

The adolescent brain & alcohol <https://brainwave.org.nz/article/the-adolescent-brain-and-alcohol/>

Drinking for two <https://brainwave.org.nz/article/drinking-for-two-how-alcohol-in-pregnancy-affects-the-developing-child/>