

ALCOHOL AND THE TEENAGE BRAIN

Even in our teenager years, when we think we have it all down – our brain is still continuing to grow.

Most of us are in a rush when we are teenagers to be an adult...but nope, we're not there just yet.

Bummer, eh?

In fact, from the age of 12 onwards our brain starts to undergo some radical changes that continue until we are in our mid 20's.

During this time, the brain is laying down the mechanics to support more sophisticated abilities and skills. It's reprogramming itself so that it can develop more 'adult' software.

These changes and new programmes prepare us to take on more responsibility and to eventually be independent from our parents. They also allow us to act in a more sophisticated way by giving us the ability to problem solve, make sense of complex information and to make plans for our future.

All these scientists are on to something when they recommend that teenagers do not drink alcohol. See, the brain is under construction and being 're-coded' during the teenage years...and drinking on the job disrupts this process.

Here's the scientific part – when scientists did brain-imaging studies they discovered that teenagers drinking alcohol heavily have differences in their brains compared to other teenagers not drinking alcohol. The parts of the brain used for learning, remembering and problem solving are all impacted by alcohol use and these changes can be lasting. Not good for the street-smart.

But that's not the only problem. Scientists have also discovered that the teenage brain is more susceptible to becoming addicted to alcohol than the adult brain. Teenagers who drink before the age of 15 are most susceptible to alcohol misuse in later life. Starting to drink too early can make the brain more likely to become addicted as you get older. No-one ever sets out to become addicted – but you may increase the chances of this happening if you start too soon.

More than any other group, teenagers seem to have the most to lose by drinking. They risk not developing the software they need to do what they want to do in life. Instead, they could be setting themselves up for later addiction.

KEY ADVICE

- Keep it real; saying no is no big deal. The safest option for teenagers is to delay drinking alcohol for as long as possible
- There is no safe level of alcohol use for teenagers. The low risk guidelines are directed towards adults only.