TEENS AND DRINKING:

Sooner really isn't better

Enjoy your teenage years

People often say that teens, i.e. you, are *awkward*. Perhaps. There's no doubt that transitioning from childhood to adulthood is a pretty complex business. You're used to living under the supervision of your parents and teachers, but, bit by bit, you have to leave behind childish things and your status as a minor, in order to become a responsible adult accountable for your own behaviour.

So much change!

You might find this transitional period of your life a little difficult to navigate. Adolescence is a time of enormous change, and it's usually during these years that you may have your first experiences with alcohol. Teens are known to get carried along by their friends: they may drink—sometimes too much—because they want to socialize and be part of the fun, or they want to relieve tension and stress. But you should know that the decision is yours, and you never *have to* drink.

Learn to become an accountable adult and manage your life responsibly.

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Wait as long as possible before you start drinking

We'll say it again: this is a time of major change for you and your body—specifically, your brain. People your age feel things deeply; at the same time, they have trouble looking into the future and anticipating the consequences of their behaviour.

Keeping your hormones in balance

Your hormones are changing, and you're producing a lot of sex hormones. That's important, since it promotes the production of growth hormones so essential to healthy development. If you drink a lot of alcohol during these years, you risk interfering with the hormonal balance your organs, muscles, bones and reproductive system need to develop properly.

Be careful. Wait until your body and your brain are fully developed before you start to drink.

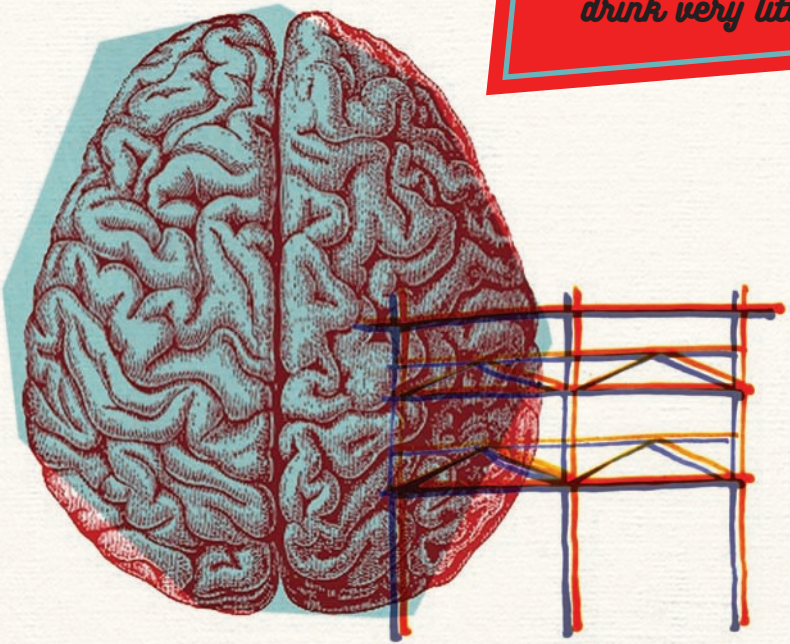
Reconfiguring your brain

The parts of your brain responsible for your emotions are also undergoing big changes during these years. The reason you feel everything so intensely is partly due to the delayed development of the frontal lobes of your brain, which govern the critical faculties we call "executive function." This includes your ability to plan, strategize, organize, concentrate and pay attention.

Your brain's network of neurons is not fully developed yet, and you are not always able to make the smartest decisions. As a result, your brain can fool you into drinking more than is good for you.

You brain develops slowly, but puberty comes on quickly and early. You still don't have the ability to anticipate the future clearly, yet the hormonal changes you're experiencing increase your desire to take risks and seek thrills. So watch out! This stark discrepancy between brain maturity and sexual maturity can lead you to drink too much.

Join the new trend:
Wait as long as
possible before
you start drinking,
and if you drink,
drink very little.



If you do drink, drink moderately

Do you ever get the impression that a lot of teens—maybe even most of them—drink? If so, then you'd be wrong. This is increasingly not the case, here in Quebec and around the world.

Young people are drinking later and less than they used to

In just a few years, the percentage of high school students who have one alcoholic drink a year has dropped from 71% to 60%, which is a very positive trend.

Teens are also drinking with increasing moderation, even if some of them sometimes drink a great deal. In fact, excessive drinking among high school students has dropped significantly in five years. In Quebec, while some alcohol abuse still persists, teens aged 14-15 and 16-17 are drinking heavily less frequently.

Despite everything, though, young people start drinking early. The legal age for purchasing alcohol in Quebec is 18, but people don't always wait that long to have their first drink. Kids generally drink alcohol for the first time around the age of 12. But things are changing and, over the last few years, it would appear that teens are waiting longer before having their first drink.

If you do drink, drink for the right reasons

Just like your parents, you and your friends drink alcohol to have fun and enhance your time together. But do you ever find yourself drinking with friends in places and under circumstances that make you want to drink more than you should? You need to be aware, and vigilant.

Unfortunately, many people drink for the wrong reasons. Obviously, not all teens drink frequently and heavily, but some of them drink because they're trying to forget their problems, or because they're having difficulties at home, at school or in their relationships.

If you drink often and a lot, talk to your parents.

Beware of alcohol and energy drinks

Some teens drink energy drinks for their stimulant effect, especially at parties. But energy drinks can be dangerous when mixed with alcohol.

People sometimes mix the two in order to stay awake longer, or to mask the unpleasant taste of alcohol. That's a really bad idea, because the mix makes you drink more—and more quickly—than you realize, and you end up with way too much alcohol in your system.

Drinking alcohol is already not a good idea. Mixing alcohol with energy drinks is even worse.

Remember:
Avoid alcohol,
and avoid alcohol
+ energy drinks even more!

When you drink with your family, you learn that alcohol can enhance the pleasure of being together.

Drinking with your family

Having your first drink at home, with your family, in an environment where people are drinking moderately, is very different from drinking in secret with other teens, especially if they're drinking a lot. They say that kids who start drinking early, without supervision, are more likely to drink frequently and heavily, which can lead to problems down the road.

Drink with your parents

You should have your first drink at home, with your parents, ideally with a meal. Your parents can help you delay that first drink as long as possible.

If you drink because you're bored, or because you want to forget your problems, your parents will be rightly concerned and want to intervene. Teens who drink because they're unhappy are likely to drink badly and too much.

If your behaviour is starting to worry the people around you, you need to accept help to deal with your problems. Teens who drink because they're depressed run the risk of ultimately attempting suicide.

Keep the lines of communication open with your parents and don't be afraid to talk to them about drinking.

Why is the law so strict?

No alcohol for minors

In Quebec, as almost everywhere else in the world, minors may not purchase alcohol. This is not a random decision, and it wasn't made just to bug you. The policy is based on all the reasons that you now know from reading this document.

The law is strict because young people like to take risks, they often drink too much, and drinking too much can cause all kinds of incidents and accidents.

That's why it is against the law to sell alcohol to minors, and it is just as illegal to buy alcohol *for* a minor.

Don't try to buy alcohol and don't ask your older friends to buy it for you.

Never drink and drive. Ever.

Drinking and driving is a dangerous combination

There may well be a "zero alcohol" rule for new drivers, but drunk driving is still one of the main causes of death on Quebec roads. Although statistics are improving steadily, nearly 30% of drivers who die in car accidents were under the influence of alcohol at the time.

Young people 16-19 years old who drive with a blood alcohol content (BAC) of 80-100 mg/100 ml of blood (0.08-0.10) are 40 times more likely to have an accident than sober drivers the same age.

What happens when you drink a lot?

When young people like you drink a lot, it really impairs your ability to make good decisions, and things just get worse over time. Your brain's plasticity (meaning its ability to change) and your memory are more sensitive to the effects of excessive drinking than an adult's brain is.

If you drink a lot, you might experience health problems, have difficulty with your schoolwork, find yourself driving while impaired, or even end up engaging in risky sexual behaviour.

Side effects of alcohol

Drinking too much can cause serious physical dysfunction, including nausea, vomiting and even fainting.

Teens who drink too much may experience a loss of appetite, weight loss, eczema, headaches and sleep disturbances.

In some extreme cases, drinking too much can cause gastrointestinal bleeding, cardiac arrhythmia, a cerebrovascular accident (stroke), or even respiratory depression that could lead to alcohol coma and death.

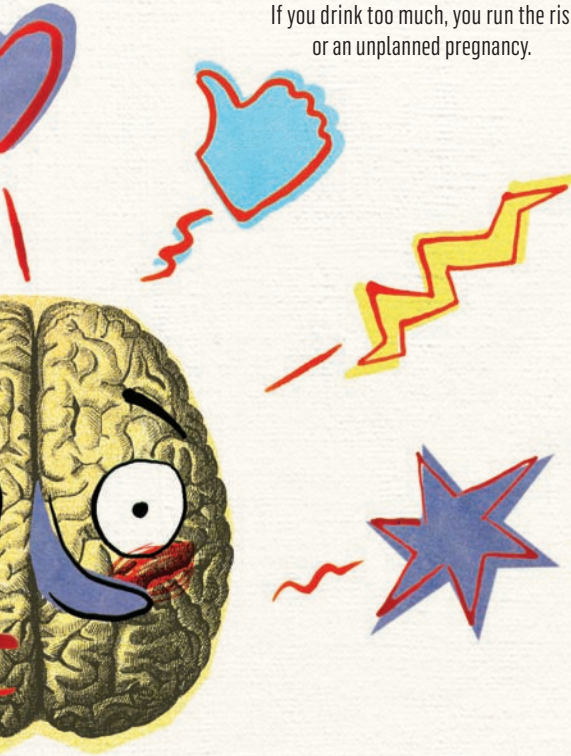
Not to mention that, if you drink a lot before you're an adult, you have a greater chance of developing a drug problem.

Alcohol, aggressive behaviour and sexuality

Just like adults, teens can become more aggressive than usual when they drink alcohol. You may find yourself more likely to be involved in violent altercations, as both aggressor and victim.

As for sexual behaviour, alcohol seems to contribute to poor judgement. For example, when teens are drinking, they often don't use a condom for their first sexual encounter, and they risk contracting a sexually transmitted infection (STI).

If you drink too much, you run the risk of having unprotected sex, which could result in an STI or an unplanned pregnancy.



If you drink frequently and a lot, you are more likely to develop health and behaviour problems.

Above all, remember: Moderation is always in good taste.

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