



'Risk taking': Why do teens do the things they do? What can parents can do to keep them as safe as possible?

Positive Choices Webinar – 19 October, 2021

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# Adolescence is 'lengthening'

Steinberg (2014) *The Age of Opportunity. Lessons from the New Science of Adolescence*  
Sawyer et al (2018) The age of adolescence. *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health* 2, 223-228

## *'Beginning in biology and ending in culture'*

- ❑ menstruation and marriage
- ❑ mid 19<sup>th</sup> century – adolescence ≈5 years
- ❑ 1900 – ≈7 years (first period at 14-15, marriage 22)
- ❑ from 1950 – each decade - age of menarche dropped 3-4 months and age of marriage rose by a year

***"... children entering into adolescence earlier than ever, but adolescents are taking longer to become adults"***

Rather than 10-19 – definition should now be 10-24

***"transition period from childhood to adulthood now occupies a greater portion of life course than ever before"***

ADVOCATE'S GUIDE

## THE FALLING AGE OF PUBERTY IN U.S. GIRLS:

What We Know, What We Need to Know



### INTRODUCTION

Girls today get their first periods, on average, a few months earlier than did girls 40 years ago, but they get their breasts one to two years earlier. Over the course of a few decades, the childhoods of U.S. girls have been significantly shortened.

What does this mean for girls today and their health in the future? We know that early puberty is a known risk factor for breast cancer and other mental and physical health problems. We need to better understand what's causing early puberty so that we can protect the health of our children now and in the future.

This companion guide to *The Falling Age of Puberty* report by Sandra Swingraber, Ph.D., highlights some key findings and recommendations.

### THE PROBLEM

In recent years, there have been ones highlighted in the media of children entering puberty as young as age five. The onset of puberty— for both black and white girls—shows signs of a continuing decline as measured by the appearance of breasts (thelarche)



and pubic hair (pubarche).<sup>1</sup> For example, in 1970, the average age of thelarche was 11.5 years. Thirty years later, it had fallen to just under 10 years for U.S. white girls and just under nine years for black girls, with a significant portion starting breast development before age eight.<sup>2</sup>

Studies have shown that the earlier girls enter puberty, the more likely they are to experience negative physical and mental health consequences. Some girls who menstruate before do not experience any of these negative outcomes, however.

### EARLY PUBERTY HAS BEEN SHOWN TO INCREASE THE RISK OF:

- Breast Cancer
- Psychological symptoms
- Higher likelihood of being overweight, low self-esteem, eating disordered, and self-harm
- Poor academic performance
- Psychological distress, depression, and anxiety
- Conduct disorders and delinquency
- Low self-esteem, low self-efficacy, and low self-worth





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# Teenagers

Thompson (2018) A Brief History of Teenagers, *Saturday Evening Post*, February 13



*"The teenager is one of the more unusual inventions of the 20th century. Humans have been turning 13 for tens of thousands of years, but **only recently did it occur to anybody that this was a special thing**, or that the bridge between childhood and adulthood deserved its own name."*

*"If most ancient cultures were gerontocratic, ruled by the old, **modern culture is fully teenocratic, governed by the tastes of young people**, with old fogies forever playing catch-up."*

# Outline of presentation

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History of 'teenagers' and 'teenage rebellion'

Why are the teen years such a risky time?

- brain development and 'risk taking' behaviour
- where is risk-taking behaviour likely to happen?

Teenage parties, gatherings and sleepovers and 'risk taking'

**What can parents do to keep teens safer and prevent high-risk behaviour?**

# The term 'teenager'

Abbowitz & Rees (2003) *What is a teenager?* Miami University

Palladino (1996) *Teenagers: An American History*. New York: BasicBooks

## Advertisers and marketers saw a new market ...

*" ... they began to promote a new social type they dubbed 'teeners,' 'teensters,' and, in 1941, 'teenagers' ... tied to the new high school world of dating, driving, music, and enjoyment. Although it would take a few years for the term 'teenager' to catch on in the popular mind, the concept was spreading rapidly, particularly as a marketing tool."*

## Growing media technology (e.g., development of TV and FM radio) linked to teen culture

- continued over time – TV, smartphones, social media

## More leisure time and independence from families

*"peer groups and market advertising became as influential as families once were ... ideology of 'youth as fun' also began to be read by many adults as 'youth as trouble'"*





## Teenage rebellion and the 1950s

Teens and 'youth as trouble' hit 'mainstream' in the 50s – media highlighting distinctive dress, habits and culture fuelled by popular media, particularly movies

# Teenage rebellion continues

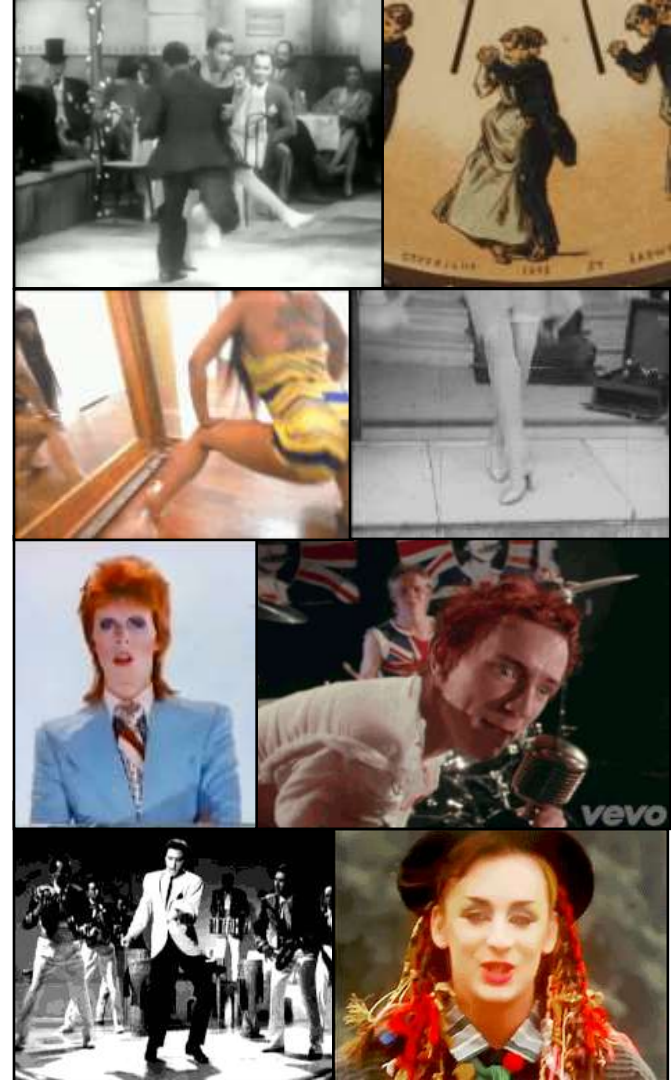
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Often linked to trends/'crazes' causing parental (adult) concern/outrage over the years

- ❑ **pool halls** (1920s)
- ❑ **music** – jazz (40s), rock and roll (50s), punk (70s)
  - ❑ dance movements
  - ❑ make-up and clothing
  - ❑ alcohol and other drugs

New and evolving issues now exist

- ❑ new range of **drugs**
- ❑ **Internet and social media**
  - ❑ internet porn
  - ❑ gambling
  - ❑ 'sexting' and online bullying
- ❑ **negotiating or managing 'consent'**





Why are the teen years such a challenging time?

Why are young people more prone to risky behaviour during this time?



# 'The Teenage Brain'

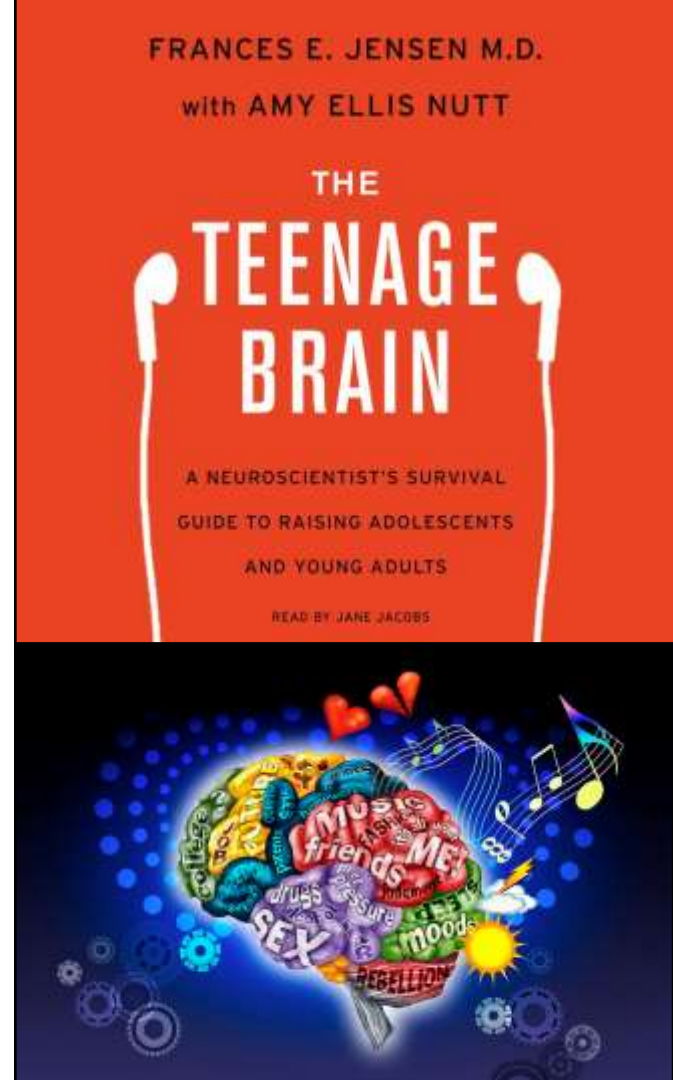
Jensen & Nutt (2015) *The Teenage Brain. A neuroscientist's survival guide to raising adolescents and young adults*

Teens not irrational – *"reasoning abilities are more or less fully developed by the age of fifteen"*

- ❑ score well on aptitude tests relying on logic and reasoning
- ❑ **aware of the dangers - so why the risk-taking?**

Actions guided by different parts of the brain

- ❑ **adults** rely on prefrontal, hippocampus, promotor cortex – reasoning and judgment more likely to be used
- ❑ **teens** use amygdala (emotions) to process information - 'gut reactions', rather than think through possible consequences



# Teen brains affect behaviour, problem solving and decision-making

Armstrong (2016) *The Power of the Adolescent Brain: Strategies for Teaching Middle and High School Students*



Actions guided by **amygala** – 'braking system' of **frontal cortex** not in place

- ❑ **decrease in reasoned thinking**
- ❑ **increase in impulsiveness – less likely to think before they act**
- ❑ **get involved in fights and arguments**
- ❑ **find it difficult to pause to consider consequences of their actions**
- ❑ **less likely to change risky or inappropriate behaviours**

Doesn't mean they can't make good decisions – it's just a bit more challenging ...

# What does 'increased risk-taking' really mean?

Armstrong (2016) *The Power of the Adolescent Brain: Strategies for Teaching Middle and High School Students*



## Adolescents weigh risk reward differently

- different neural pattern in seeking pleasure/reward than children or adults
- respond to big rewards, not little ones
- primed to experience *"the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat"*

*"... adolescent willingness to take big risks for big rewards ... a study ... asked adolescents and adults if they would be willing to play a game of Russian roulette in return for \$1 million. Every one of the adults said no. Half of the adolescents said yes."*

## Teens are aware of dangers but value the reward more than adults

*"they don't downgrade the risk, they give more weight to the payoff"*

# Risk-taking increases if around peers

Armstrong (2016) *The Power of the Adolescent Brain: Strategies for Teaching Middle and High School Students*  
Chein et al (2011) Peers increase adolescent risk taking by enhancing activity in the brain's reward circuitry. *Developmental Science* 14(2)



## Reward increases and teens are more willing to take risks if around peers or believe peers are watching them

*"In a computerized simulation game ... participants raced an automobile ... Subjects were ...to reach the end ... as quickly as possible ... When tested alone, adolescents performed pretty much as adults did, with minimal risk-taking activity. But when they were told that there were two same-age, same-sex peers watching them play on a nearby monitor in a nearby room, their risk-taking increased ... and their brains displayed more activation in areas involved in reward valuation."*

- ❑ **neural pathways actually change when they believe peers are present**
- ❑ occurs even without direct interaction - not simply '*peer pressure*'

# So why does this happen?

Armstrong (2016) *The Power of the Adolescent Brain: Strategies for Teaching Middle and High School Students*



Contradicts basic human behavior of survival but like other features of teen years –  
**risk taking is important and necessary**

- ❑ evolutionary feature - "*engage in high-risk behavior to leave the village and find a mate*"
- ❑ not only humans – rodents, primates and birds seek out same-age peers and fight with parents
- ❑ "*all help get the adolescent away from home territory*"
- ❑ **'healthy' risk taking** should be encouraged but ...

**Where's the 'line' for parents? Where's high-risk behaviour likely to occur?**



# Teenage parties, gatherings and sleepovers

Provide a **'perfect storm'** – teens, surrounded by their peers and difficult to monitor. High-risk behaviours – alcohol and other drug use, sexual activity, driving and fighting

# Alcohol sets particular challenges for parents

Tael-Öeren et al (2019) The relationship between parental attitudes and children's alcohol use: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Addiction* 114(9), 1527-1546



Lower parental 'acceptance' of most high-risk behaviour – alcohol often regarded differently. Why?

*"Less restrictive parental attitudes towards children's alcohol use are associated with increases in children's alcohol use onset, alcohol use frequency and drunkenness. Children's perception of less restrictive parental attitudes is associated with children's alcohol use."*

**What about parental provision of alcohol? Does that keep them 'safer'?**



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# Parental provision of alcohol

Mattick et al (2018) Association of parental supply of alcohol with adolescent drinking, alcohol-related harms, and alcohol use disorder symptoms: a prospective cohort study. *Lancet*



2018 study ≈1900 adolescents and parents - **6-year period** (12-17 years) – was parental supply of alcohol protective?

*"... no evidence ... that parental supply protects from adverse drinking outcomes ... this practice is associated with risk, both directly and indirectly through increased access to alcohol from other sources."*

*"We found that parental provision of alcohol to their children is associated with subsequent binge drinking, alcohol-related harm(s) and symptoms of alcohol use disorder"*

*"... no evidence of any benefit or protective effect, either directly ... or indirectly"*

*"Parental supply is associated with increased risk of other supply, not the reverse"*





### WHAT DO WE KNOW?

Although more young Australians are delaying their first alcoholic drink, many of those drinking before 18, in addition to experiencing negative alcohol-related outcomes such as injuries and mental health, early alcohol use can lead to harmful drinking practices and alcohol use disorders later in life. Adolescent alcohol consumption can also adversely affect brain development. Identifying modifiable factors associated with adolescent alcohol use, such as parenting practices, is important for preventing alcohol-related harms among young people.

Prior to 2018, in Australia, official advice suggested that alcohol use was a 'normal' part of adolescent development, and that supervised alcohol consumption could reduce potential harm. Therefore, parents may choose to allow their underage teens to drink at home to help young people learn responsible drinking practices. However, with mounting evidence about the harmful risks of underage alcohol use, current National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) guidelines<sup>1</sup> suggest delaying alcohol use until at least the age of 18.

### WHAT CAN WE LEARN?

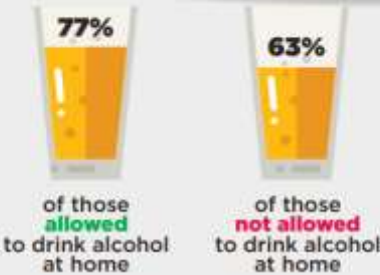
This snapshot series is based on Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) to answer three main research questions: (1) How many Australian teens are allowed to drink at home? (2) Does permission to drink at home result in teens drinking more and a greater rate of experiencing alcohol-related harm? (3) Which teens are more likely to be allowed to drink at home?

<sup>1</sup> The National Health and Medical Research Council. <https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/guidelines/view-guideline/10468>

## Who consumed alcohol in the past week?



## Who consumed alcohol in the past month?



Among teens who drank in the past week, those who were allowed to drink at home consumed more alcohol than those who were not allowed



Teens allowed to drink at home were more likely to have experienced alcohol-related harm compared to those without permission (23% vs 17%, respectively)

# Alcohol use among teens allowed to drink at home

Data from *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)* - an ongoing, nationally representative study following 10,000 children and their families recruited in 2004

# What can parents do around alcohol?

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Can't 'inoculate' teens - can try to ensure **healthy attitudes** and they're as **safe as possible**

- ❑ **create age-appropriate rules and consequences** - modify as they get older but don't be influenced by others – stick to your guns!
- ❑ **decide on an 'out word'** – to assist them to get out of situations
- ❑ **promote positive norms** – 'drinking to get drunk' is not the norm and not everyone drinks and most adults drink responsibly
- ❑ **age-appropriate monitoring is vital** – 'loosen the leash' as they get older but don't let go altogether
- ❑ **be a positive role model** – look at how you socialise with alcohol and discuss your drinking with your child
- ❑ **communicate and connect** - it's not just what you say, it's the when, where and why that are also important



# Positive role modelling

## Never underestimate your influence

- ❑ link **alcohol with food** whenever possible
  - ❑ **provide food and non-alcoholic beverages** for guests
  - ❑ you're not going drinking, you're having a drink with a meal
- ❑ **limit your alcohol** - not about stopping drinking – children learn from observing responsible drinking
- ❑ **decline the offer of alcohol occasionally**
- ❑ **organise alcohol-free events** for friends/family
- ❑ **don't portray alcohol as a way to deal with stress**, e.g., *"I've had a bad day, I need a drink!"* – use healthier ways e.g., exercise, listening to music, etc

## Tips for modelling low-risk drinking

### DO

- > *Model responsible drinking around your children from when they are very young.*
- > *Make a point of sometimes refusing alcohol when your children are present.*
- > *Make sure you provide food and non-alcoholic beverages if making alcohol available to guests.*
- > *Model healthy ways of coping with stress without alcohol like exercise, listening to music, or talking things over.*

### ⊗ DON'T

- > *Drink and drive.*
- > *Let other adults drive after attending a function at your place.*
- > *Portray alcohol as a good way to deal with stress, e.g. 'I've had a bad day, I need a drink'.*
- > *Convey the idea alcohol is fun or glamorous through stories about your own or others' drinking.*

I knew I was a bad role model when my cat started drinking from my wine glass.



# Communicate and connect

Jones et al (2020) Parent-child conversations associated with alcohol-related risk behaviours in young people (13-17 years) in the UK: a cross-sectional study. *BMJ Open*, 10(6)



It's not just what you say - when, where and why are also important

- ❑ **what information do teens want?** We tend to give information we think they need
  - ❑ 'formal sit down' conversations least effective – regarded as 'heavy-handed'
  - ❑ **'proactive'** is always going to be better than **'reactive'**
- ❑ want teens to **'plan ahead'**
  - ❑ discuss 000 remind them you support them if they need to call – ***"Call 000 and then call me!"***
  - ❑ ensure they have the **'Emergency+' app** on their phone
  - ❑ provide name and number of their **'buddy' for the night**

# Keep connected ...

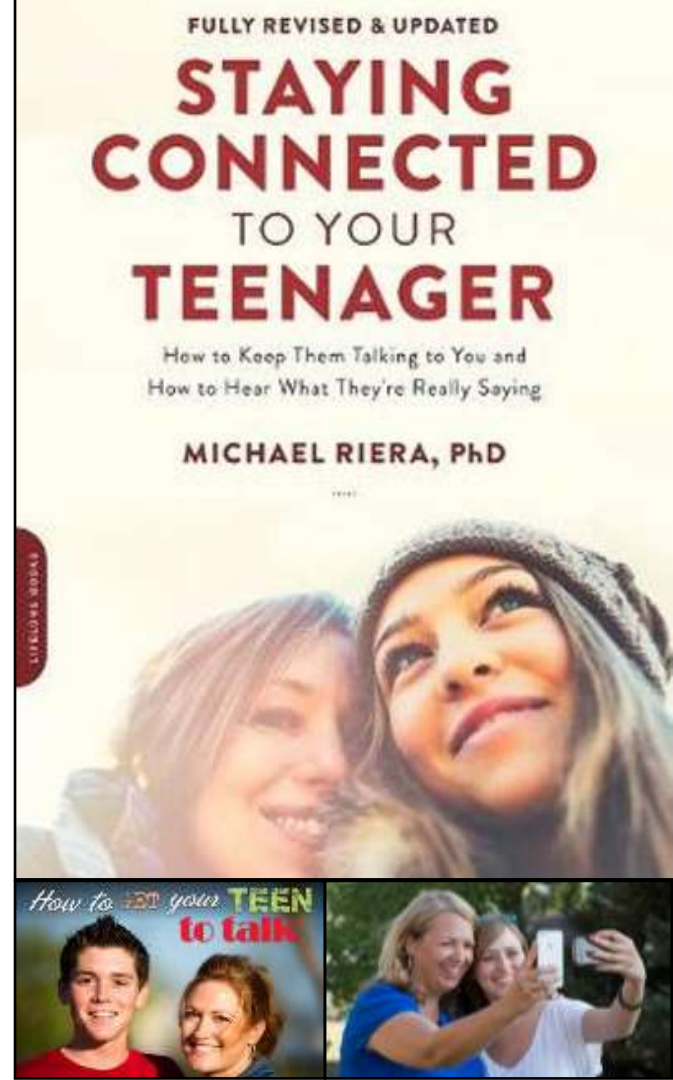
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Keeping '**connected**' is important but can be difficult - if you say 'no' all the time - going to be 'butting heads'

**Always be on the lookout for opportunities to say 'yes'**

During early teens parents **move from a 'managing' role to a 'consulting' one**

- ❑ important to have practical strategies to maintain communication and keep you connected
- ❑ **use the car**
- ❑ **talk late at night, very late!**
- ❑ **taking them to a restaurant for dinner**
- ❑ **use of indirect communication – notes, emails, texts**
- ❑ **how to use the dinner table and how not to!**



# The final word...

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## Tell your children they're great, all the time!

- ❑ there is always something positive you can find to say about your child - find it and say it!

## Really listen to your child and 'connect'

- ❑ when did you last 'connect' with your child? Try to find the time at least once a week for a few minutes to really talk and listen to your child – it'll be worth it in so many ways!

## Three simple golden rules ...

- ❑ **know where your child is**
- ❑ **know who they're with**
- ❑ **know when they'll be home**



# For more information, or to follow me on social media

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**Drug and Alcohol Research and Training Australia (DARTA)**



**@DARTAPDILLON**

**Instagram** – where I put posts for young people every Saturday night at 8.00pm (AEST)



**dillonpauldarta**



**You can look after a sleepy drunk, you can't look after an unconscious drunk. Make sure you know the difference ...**



**Don't prop drunk people onto tables/benches – if they fall to sleep or pass out, at the very least you'll get a chipped tooth - but you could get a far worse injury ...**



# For more information, or to follow me on social media

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dillonpauldarta



## The Real Deal on Drugs with Paul Dillon



Providing teens with what they **want** to know about alcohol and other drugs



EPISODE TITLE
PUTTING A DRUNK PERSON TO BED TO 'SLEEP IT OFF'
WHAT IS 'MANGING' AND IS IT DANGEROUS?
HOW DO YOU LOOK AFTER A DRUNK VOMITING FRIEND?
DOES VOMITING SOBER YOU UP AND WHAT ABOUT 'TACTICAL VOMITS'?
MDMA OR ECSTASY: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE AND WHAT ARE THE RISKS?
VAPING: WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT HERE AND IS IT SAFER THAN SMOKING?
CANNABIS: ANSWERING YOUR TOP 3 QUESTIONS
'JUNGLE JUICE': WHAT IS IT AND WHY ARE SOME YOUNG PEOPLE USING IT?
WHEN DO YOU NEED TO CALL AN AMBULANCE FOR A DRUNK PERSON?
HALLUCINOGENS: ACID, TRIPS, MUSHROOMS AND PEYOTE



