

Teens don't like danger, just don't understand consequences, study shows

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(Medical Xpress)—A new study by Yale School of Medicine researchers and their colleagues finds that adolescents commonly take more risks

than younger children and adults because they are more willing to accept risks when consequences are unknown, rather than because they are attracted to danger, as often assumed.

Adolescents have the highest rates of sexually transmitted diseases and criminal behaviors of any age group, and even drive faster than adults. The death and injury rate of adolescents is 200% greater than for their younger peers, according to research cited in the study.

Ifat Levy, assistant professor in [comparative medicine](#) and [neurobiology](#) at Yale, and colleagues report their results Oct. 1 in the [Proceedings of the National Academies of Sciences](#). They explored risk-taking by studying a group of adolescents and a group of mid-life adults who were asked to make choices that involved known and unknown risks.

The 65 [study participants](#), who ranged in age from 12 to 50, were asked to make a series of [financial decisions](#) in a lottery, each with varying degrees of risk. In some trials, subjects were told the exact probabilities of winning a lottery. In a separate, ambiguous lottery, they were not given the precise probabilities of winning, making the level of risk uncertain.

Levy and her team found that when risks were precisely stated, adolescents avoided them at least as much—and sometimes more—than adults. But adolescents were much more tolerant of ambiguity in situations where the likelihood of winning and losing was unknown. When the risk involved was not precisely known, they were more willing to accept them, compared to adults.

This makes sense biologically, Levy said. "Young organisms need to be open to the unknown in order to gain information about their world," she said. "From a policy perspective it means that informing adolescents as much as possible about the likelihoods for the costs and benefits of [risky](#)

[behaviors](#) may effectively reduce their engagement in such behaviors."

Levy said it is not that adolescents lack the cognitive ability to understand their actions—[adolescents](#) are just as smart as adults.

"Behavioral economics tells us that risk-taking is not a simple process," she said. "It is affected by our attitudes toward known risks, but also by our attitudes toward unknown or ambiguous situations, in which the likelihoods for positive and negative outcomes are not known."

More information: www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1207144109

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