

ABC of adolescence Health promotion

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Health can be defined as optimum physical, emotional, social, spiritual, and intellectual health. Health promotion is the science or art of helping people change their lifestyle to move towards a state of optimal health. Lifestyle change can be facilitated through a combination of efforts to increase awareness, change behaviour, and create environments that support good health practices.

Need for health promotion

There are five main reasons for a particular health promotion focus on young people.

Health behaviours in youth continue into adult life

One of the most compelling arguments for a focus on adolescent health is that adolescence is a time when new health behaviours are laid down—behaviours that track into adulthood and will influence health and morbidity throughout life. Health behaviours in childhood are dominated by parental instruction and shared family values. During adolescence young people begin to explore alternative or “adult” health behaviours, including smoking, drinking alcohol, drug misuse, violence, and sexual intimacy. The continuity of these behaviours into adulthood is well documented.

Health behaviours relating to exercise and food are also laid down in adolescence and track into adult life. Adolescent obesity predicts adult obesity, which is strongly and independently predictive of cardiovascular risk, and cardiovascular risk in young adulthood is highly related to the degree of adiposity as early as age 13 years. Evidence also shows that health in adolescence can have a considerable impact on the development of adult conditions. This evidence challenges earlier notions that adolescents moving into adulthood “grow out of” health risk behaviours and mental health problems.

Immediate effects of adolescent health behaviours

Adolescent health behaviours have a direct effect on immediate as well as long term health outcomes and quality of life—for example, taking exercise, engaging in risky sexual behaviour (resulting in sexually transmitted infections or teenage pregnancy), and using the roads safely.

Worrying trends in morbidity and mortality

Adolescent mortality and morbidity show worrying trends in national priority areas, such as mental health (for example, male suicide rates), sexual health (teenage pregnancies), and cardiovascular risk (such as obesity and diabetes). Earlier engagement in sexual activity, high rates of teenage pregnancy, and the threat of HIV have similarly focused attention on adolescents. Given the evidence on the continuity of health risk behaviours in adolescence into adulthood, morbidity trends in adolescence argue strongly for urgent attention to adolescents’ health and for the development of targeted, adolescent specific interventions.

Developmental issues

Dynamic and continued development in every aspect of a young person’s life during adolescence means that young

This is the fifth in a series of 12 articles



Domains for health promotion. Adapted from O'Donnell MP. *American Journal of Health Promotion* 1999;2(3):5

Major health promotion areas in adolescence

- Health risk behaviours (smoking, alcohol use, drug misuse, sexual health, and risk taking)
- Parent-adolescent communication
- Depression and mental health
- Violence
- Physical activity, nutrition, and obesity
- Health inequalities and social exclusion

Prevalence of regular smoking rises from 1% at age 11 years to 24% at 15 years, and over 90% of adult smokers began smoking as teenagers; similarly, few people start experimenting with alcohol and drugs after their teenage years.



The website Teenage Health Freak (www.teenagehealthfreak.org) promotes health in a user friendly way to teenagers.

Improvements in mortality and morbidity in early childhood have not been matched in adolescence

Abc Of Adolescence

Brendan G. Carr



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