

Fact Sheet: Health of Young People

Key facts

- More than 1.8 million young people aged 15 to 24 die each year, mostly due to preventable causes.
- About 16 million girls aged 15 to 19 give birth every year.
- Young people, 15 to 24 years old, accounted for 40% of all new HIV infections among adults in 2008.
- At least 20% of adolescents will experience a mental health problem in a year, most commonly depression or anxiety.
- An estimated 150 million young people use tobacco.
- Approximately 565 young people aged 10 to 29 die every day through interpersonal violence.
- Road traffic injuries cause an estimated 1 000 young people to die every day.

Overview

Most young people are healthy, however, more than 1.8 million young people aged 15 to 24 die each year. A much greater number of young people suffer from illnesses which hinder their ability to grow and develop to their full potential. And a still great number of young people engage in behaviours that jeopardize not only their current state of health, but often their health for years to come. It is estimated that nearly two-thirds of premature deaths and one-third of the total disease burden in adults are associated with conditions or behaviours that began in their youth, including: tobacco use, a lack of physical activity, unprotected sex or exposure to violence.

Promoting healthy practices during adolescence, and taking steps to better protect young people from health risks is critical to the future of countries' health and social infrastructure and to the prevention of health problems in adulthood.

In 2002, the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children recognized the need for the "Development and implementation of national health policies and programmes for adolescents, including goals and indicators, to promote their physical and mental health".¹

An important framework for young people's health are the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Two of the MDGs are particularly relevant to young people's health:

- MDG5 aims to achieve universal access to reproductive health, for which one of the indicators is the pregnancy rate among 15 to 19 year old girls;
- MDG 6 to halt the spread of HIV/AIDS has indicators like a 25% reduction among young people, and also measures the proportion of 15 to 24 year olds with comprehensive and correct knowledge of HIV/AIDS.

The right of all young people to health is also enshrined in international legal instruments. In 2003, the Committee of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) issued a General Comment in which the special health and development needs and rights of adolescents and young people were recognized. These are further supported by the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Right to Health.

Health issues affecting young people

¹ (United Nations, 11 Oct 2002, A/RES/S-27/2)

Early pregnancy and childbirth

About 16 million girls aged 15 to 19 years give birth every year - roughly 11% of all births worldwide. The vast majority of adolescents births occur in developing countries. The risk of dying from pregnancy-related causes is much higher for adolescents than for older women. The younger the adolescent, the greater the risk. The formulation and enforcement of laws that specify a minimum age of marriage, community mobilization to support these laws, as well as better access to contraceptive information and services can decrease too-early pregnancies. Those adolescents who do become pregnant should be provided with quality antenatal care and skilled birth attendance. Where permitted by law, those adolescents who opt to terminate their pregnancies, should have access to safe abortion. .

HIV

Fifteen to 24 year olds accounted for an estimated 40% of all new HIV infections among adults worldwide in 2008. Every day, 2 500 more young people get infected and globally there are more than 5.7 million young people living with HIV/AIDS. Young people need to know how to protect themselves and have the means to do so. This includes condoms to prevent sexual transmission of the virus and clean needles and syringes for those who inject drugs. Currently, only 30% of young men and 19% of young women have the comprehensive and correct knowledge they need to protect themselves from acquiring the virus. Better access to HIV testing and counselling will inform young people about their status, help them to get the care they need, and avoid further spread of the virus. Where social, cultural and economic conditions increase the vulnerability of young people to HIV infection, an effective HIV prevention strategy should aim to address these factors as well.

Malnutrition

Many boys and girls in developing countries enter adolescence undernourished, making them more vulnerable to disease and early death. Conversely, overweight and obesity (another form of malnutrition with serious health consequences and important longer term financial implications for health systems) are increasing among young people in both low- and high-income countries. Adequate nutrition and healthy eating and physical exercise habits at this age are foundations for good health in adulthood. In addition, it is important to prevent nutritional problems by providing advice, food and micronutrient supplementation (e.g. to pregnant adolescents), as well as detecting and managing problems (such as anaemia) promptly and effectively when they occur.

Mental health

At least 20% of adolescents will experience a mental health problem in a year, most commonly depression and anxiety. The risk is increased by experiences of violence, humiliation, devaluation and poverty, and suicide is one of the leading causes of death in young people. Building life skills in children and adolescents, and providing them with psychosocial support in schools and other community settings can help promote mental health. If problems arise, they should be detected and managed by competent and caring health workers.

Tobacco use

The vast majority of tobacco users worldwide began when they were adolescents. Today an estimated 150 million young people use tobacco. This number is increasing globally, particularly among young women. Half of those users will die prematurely as a result of tobacco use. Banning tobacco advertising, raising the prices of tobacco products, and laws prohibiting smoking in public places reduce the number of people who start using tobacco products. They

also lower the amount of tobacco consumed by smokers and increase the numbers of young people who quit smoking.

Harmful use of alcohol

Harmful drinking among young people is an increasing concern in many countries. It reduces self-control and increases risky behaviours. It is a primary cause of injuries (including those due to road traffic accidents), violence (especially domestic violence), and premature deaths.. Banning alcohol advertising and regulating access to it are effective strategies to reduce alcohol use by young people. Brief interventions of advice and counselling when alcohol use is detected can contribute to reducing harmful use.

Violence

An estimated 565 young people aged 10 to 29 years die every day through interpersonal violence, with males at greater risk. For each death, an estimated 20 to 40 youths require hospital treatment for a violence-related injury. Violence is one of the leading causes of death among young people, particularly males. Sexual violence is widespread, and affects young women in particular. Promoting nurturing relationships between parents and children early in life, providing training in life skills, and reducing access to alcohol and lethal means such as firearms can help prevent violence. Effective and empathetic care for adolescent victims of violence and ongoing support can help deal with both the physical and the psychological consequences of violence.

Injuries

Unintentional injuries are a leading cause of death and disability among young people. Road traffic injuries take the lives of a staggering 1 000 young people every day. Advising young people on driving safely, strictly enforcing laws that prohibit driving under the influence, of alcohol and drugs and increasing access to reliable and safe public transportation can reduce road traffic accidents in young people. If road traffic crashes occur, prompt access to effective trauma care can be life saving. Community actions and public education targeted to young people on how to avoid drowning, burns and falls can also reduce injuries.

WHO's response

As the directing and coordinating authority for health within the United Nations system, WHO carries out a range of functions:

- Strengthening epidemiology: finding out the number of young people who die, experience illness and injury, and the number who engage in behaviours that can lead to illness or injury in the future. It also includes assessing factors in the community that hinder or help the health and development of adolescents.
- Generating evidence for programmatic action: identifying the most effective ways of promoting good health among young people, preventing health problems and responding to them when they occur.
- Developing methods and tools: producing the means by which evidence can be applied in countries.
- Building capacity for action: ensuring that there are individuals and institutions that can apply these tools in countries.
- Advocacy: raising attention to issues among the public at large and among special groups.
- Generating consensus: building a shared understanding among partners and a shared sense of purpose on what needs to be done.
- Supporting countries with the formulation of policies and programmes, their implementation, and monitoring and evaluation.

The way forward

To improve the health of young people in a sustainable way, the health sector must carry out four strategic functions:

- Collect, analyse, disseminate and use data to support advocacy, policies and programmes directed at adolescent health.
- Develop policies that enable and guide actions to respond to the needs and fulfil the rights of adolescents to health.
- Develop a systematic, national effort to standardize and improve the quality and expand the coverage of health services for adolescents.
- Engage other sectors to make complementary contributions to improving the health of adolescents.

In order to deliver results, not just in one area of youth health but across the key health issues referred to above, a sustained and comprehensive effort led by individual ministries of health with support from UN agencies is needed.

Related links

Country data on adolescent fertility <http://www.un.org/esa/population/unpop.htm>

Country data on HIV and AIDS 2008 <http://apps.who.int/globalatlas/predefinedReports>

Country data on nutrition

<http://apps.who.int/bmi/index.jsp>

Country data on tobacco use (in adults over 15)

http://www.who.int/tobacco/mpower/mpower_report_full_2008.pdf (Page 267)