

Family Physician Corner

Preventive Care for Adolescents

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The primary goal of family medicine is to prevent heart disease and stroke, accidents, cancer, and mental illness. Adolescents have many risk factors associated with each of these areas and have identified a range of issues that they would like to discuss with health professionals¹. Providing preventive health care for adolescents can be challenging; however, it is essential that physicians offer a comfortable and confidential environment for addressing the common health related issues for this age group.

Adolescents often behave in ways that put them at risk, and family physicians, though sometimes uneasy with these patients or short of time, should be aware of various effective strategies for health promotion in this population².

WHO has described adolescence as the period of life when an individual is no longer a child, but not yet an adult. It is the period in which an individual undergoes enormous physical and psychological changes. In addition, the adolescent experiences changes in social expectations and perceptions³.

Teenagers have a high prevalence of unhealthy behaviors. In a randomized control trial done on 1488 adolescents with a research question of “ Does inviting teenagers to general practice health consultations and appropriate follow-up care result in behavior change?”; it showed that health promotion consultations in general practice are welcomed by teenagers. Such consultations provide an effective opportunity for identifying and addressing mental and physical health issues and encouraging healthy lifestyles⁴.

Health Promotion for Adolescents

Health promotion is the process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve, their health. To reach a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, an individual or group must be able to identify and to realize aspirations, to satisfy needs, and to change or cope with the environment. The ultimate goal of health promotion and "Positive Health" for individuals and groups is to control health determinants and to support healthy behavioral patterns related to daily life⁵.

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Trends in the general population towards increased awareness about health are not necessarily mirrored amongst adolescents. One survey in the UK reports at least half of the adolescents as being more concerned about unemployment than ill health. In spite of being well informed, health was not seen as the most important goal in life by many young people⁶. The adolescents may want health messages that are different from those that health professionals are interested in delivering.

Which Area of Health Problems should be covered in Health Promotion of Adolescents?

Adolescence is a unique stage in the human development and it is the most important period in which risky behaviors could be acquired. Thus, health promotion should cover these health problems that the adolescents face. The priority of health behavior goals for adolescents includes the followings: consistent use of seat belts in the car, never smoking, eating a prudent diet and getting regular exercise. Drawing upon data from around the world, WHO developed a list of “priority” health problems affecting adolescents³:

- Intentional and unintentional injuries.
- Sexual and reproductive health problems (including HIV/AIDs).
- Substance use and abuse (tobacco, alcohol and other substances).
- Mental health problems.
- Nutritional problems.
- Endemic and chronic diseases.

Comprehensive preventive adolescent health care requires implementing supportive services that are teen-focused and teen-friendly. This could be established through creation of adolescent friendly clinics in all primary care health centers.

Running a Primary Care Adolescent Clinic

There is debate regarding running adolescent clinic in primary care versus not. The advantage of running a clinic for adolescents in primary care is that it provides a safe place for adolescents to discuss issues that are important to them such as smoking and obesity; the clinic will target the unhealthy life styles. The clinic will stress confidentiality as well. However, the disadvantage is the time, cost, and the stigma that the adolescents may feel if sign is mentioned as “adolescent’s clinic”. Even rigorous intervention sometimes fails to produce desired outcome in an adolescent, which raises the question of whether it is worth the time and cost⁴.

Confidentiality is a very important concern for youth. During adolescence, young people begin to assume more independence. Part of this process involves exerting more control over decisions related to their health, including when, where and how they access health information and programs. Services need to be adaptable to enable adolescents to obtain information, support and services that are appropriate to their stage of development and learning style⁷.

In a study done in primary care setting in Bahrain, 56% of the adolescents prefer to be seen in general clinic instead of special clinic; although 65% of the adolescents think

that the clinic in primary care is confidential⁸. Providing an adolescent friendly setting in the primary care centers could overcome these obstacles.

Planning an Adolescent Health Clinic

- * It should be easily accessible after school hours.
- * The health center staff needs to be committed and seen to be liking the adolescents and welcoming them.
- * The visit should have separate time for the family and then the adolescent alone to provide rapport and hence trust.
- * Establish confidentiality and avoiding interruptions.
- * Place books and leaflets on common topics in the waiting room or office and let them be available for distribution.

Interview Techniques

The technique should be started with establishing rapport

- ١- Introduce your self to the teen and teen parents.
- ٢- Begin by chatting informally about friends, school or hobbies.
- ٣- Let the adolescent talk for a while.
- ٤- Start with non threatening health questions, such as review systems, especially if the adolescent is highly tense or suspicious.
- ٥- Ensure the confidentiality.
- ٦- Good listening skills include: Stay focused on what the teen is telling you, be cautious about giving advice before being asked and try to understand the teen's perspective⁹.

Suggestions to Assist the Practitioner during the Interview

- 1- Avoid writing during the interview, especially during sensitive questioning.
- 2- Avoid lecturing and admonishing.
- 3- When asking direct questions, use less personal questions before more personal ones and the questions should be open-ended.
- 4- Talk in terms that the adolescent will understand.
- 5- Criticize the activity, not the adolescent.
- 6- Highlight the positive behaviors⁹.

Investing in Adolescents Health

Today's adolescents are our future parents and grandparents, what is learnt during this period of life is a long lasting behavior and the roots will extend to the next generations. Thus investing in adolescents' health will definitely reduce most preventable diseases such as cardiovascular diseases and cancers related to smoking and it will avert health cost as well. Another issue in investing in adolescents' health is that it will decrease the burden of mortality related to intentional and non intentional injuries such as car accidents and death related to violence.

Investment in adolescent health will maximize their opportunity to develop to their full potential and to contribute the best they can to society. It also makes economical sense: better-prepared and healthy adolescents will result in productivity gain when

entering the workforce. When adolescents develop suboptimally or die prematurely this means a waste of earlier investment³.

Why Invest in Adolescent Health?

There are three main reasons for investing in adolescent health according to WHO:

- Health benefits for the individual adolescent in terms of his/her current and future health, and in terms of the intergenerational effects.
- Economic benefits: improved productivity, return on investments, averts future health cost.
- As a human right: adolescents (like other age groups) have a right to achieve the highest attainable level of health^{10,11}.

CONCLUSION

Adapting family medicine settings and offering a comfortable environment for adolescents could be effective in promoting healthy behavior in this age group.

Health risk behaviors and health habits have their genes in adolescence, healthy behaviors and lifestyle choices established during adolescence have potential to persist into adult life. Health promotion is a vital tool for adolescents' positive life long impact on health. Investing in prevention and promotion during adolescence averts future health costs and reduces the burden of morbidity and mortality in later life.

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