

ADOLESCENT HEALTH

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The adolescent period is a short period in the life of every person, namely from 10-19 years. Nonetheless, during this short period, he or she is undergoing much changes in bodily functions as well as in the psycho-social areas of life.

As GPs, we are often the point of first contact regarding many issues that the adolescent faces and the presentation may be biomedical initially, but may reveal underlying problems such as depression, difficulty in coping with the school work or with intimate relationships. Parents are also facing bewilderment as the child struggles with their often silent turmoil. The adolescent is exposed to risk-taking behaviour and may be tempted to experiment in areas such as sex, drugs and substance abuse.

Adolescent health is a growing area in many parts of the developed and developing world. It is rapidly gaining recognition as an area of unmet need. We will do well to understand the health problems specific to this demographic segment of our patient pool. We may well save a life as well as help families deal with the growing child-adult.

Adolescents are generally thought to be healthy. This is only partly true. Many adolescents die prematurely, mostly through accidents, suicide, violence, pregnancy-related complications and other illnesses that are either preventable or treatable. There is also a recognition of the wide-ranging health problems faced by adolescents because of a combination of biological, psychological, and social factors¹. Although there are relatively few deaths due to such problems, with appropriate health care targeted towards the special needs of adolescents, their transition into adulthood can be made much smoother and mentally less traumatic.

There is a need to recognize that adolescent boys are different from adolescent girls, apart from obvious biological differences. There are also issues regarding gender socialisation, psychological development, and health issues that must be considered when we design interventions².

WHO, along with its partners, UNICEF and UNFPA, advocate an accelerated approach to promoting the health and development of young people in the second decade of life. There is a need to provide adolescents worldwide with the support and the opportunities to: acquire accurate information about their health needs; build the life skills needed to avoid risk-taking behaviour; obtain counseling, especially during crisis situations; have access to health services (including reproductive health services); and live in a safe and supportive environment.

In this issue of the Singapore Family Physician, the focus is on adolescent health³. The articles cover a spectrum of adolescent health topics, namely: understanding adolescents; adolescent friendly consultation; adolescent addictive behaviours; adolescent mental health; eating disorder; gynaecological issues in the adolescent female; and developmental issues in the adolescent male.

We hope these articles, the MCQs, and the related seminars and workshops will help us gain a greater insight into the world of the adolescent and help him or her transition into fully alive and well-adjusted human beings, taking their rightful place in society. The future of the world depends on how they grow up or how they fail to grow up well.

REFERENCES

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