

Sexual Health for Adolescents

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Adolescence is a critical stage of development, marking the transition from childhood to adulthood. During this period, adolescents undergo significant biological, emotional, social, and psychological changes, which help shape their identity. However, due to these changes, adolescents often have a limited understanding of the connection between their behaviors and potential consequences. This can lead to feelings of invincibility and risky decision-making. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines adolescents as individuals aged 10–19 years, further categorized into early adolescence (10–14 years) and late adolescence (15–19 years). Over 25% of the world's population falls within the 10–24 age-group, with 75% residing in developing countries.

Healthy sexuality is a vital aspect of adolescent development. As adults, we have a crucial role in helping young people establish healthy behaviors, routines, and relationships that they can carry into adulthood. The sexual and reproductive health decisions adolescents make today will have lasting effects on their health, well-being, and their future families. The behaviors they adopt during adolescence can influence both their own future health and that of their communities and nations for generations to come.

Many chronic health issues faced in adulthood have their origins in adolescent behavior. The negative health consequences experienced by adolescents can often be passed down through generations. This makes investing in adolescent health not only an investment in their future but in the well-being of future generations.

While adolescence is typically a time of growth and thriving, it is also a period when many young people face significant challenges. Premature deaths from accidents, suicide, violence, and pregnancy-related complications are unfortunately common among adolescents. Navigating this transition can be difficult, particularly when young people may not fully understand how risky sexual behavior can negatively affect their health both now and in the future.

Healthy sexual development during adolescence involves more than just physical changes and sexual behavior. It encompasses the development of emotional maturity, relationship skills, and a positive body image. Often, when discussing adolescence and sexuality, the focus tends to be on what adults do not want young people to do. However, sexuality is a natural, positive, and lifelong aspect of human health, encompassing much more than specific behaviors.

A sexually healthy adolescent is one who can successfully navigate key developmental tasks related to sexuality, such as:

- Accepting their body, gender identity, and sexual orientation.
- Effectively communicating with family, peers, and partners.

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- Possessing accurate knowledge of human anatomy and physiology.
- Understanding the risks, responsibilities, and outcomes of sexual actions.
- Developing the skills to reduce risks and protect themselves.
- Knowing how to access health care services and community resources when needed.
- Setting and respecting personal sexual boundaries.
- Acting responsibly according to their personal values.
- Forming and maintaining healthy, meaningful relationships.

The WHO defines sexual health as “a state of physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction, or infirmity.”

Comprehensive, confidential, and accessible sexual and reproductive health care is foundational to a young person's health and well-being. All young people should have access to information and services that are:

- Available in sufficient numbers.
- Physically and economically accessible.
- Free from discrimination.
- Medically accurate.
- Culturally appropriate.

As healthcare professionals, we play a pivotal role in supporting and expanding access to sexual and reproductive health care for all adolescents. Our responsibilities include:

Education

- Educating ourselves and colleagues about state laws and policies concerning care delivery, and identifying local health organizations for collaboration.
- Providing accurate, age-appropriate information about sexual development and health.

- Educating about the prevention, treatment, and management of sexually transmitted infections (STIs).
- Offering contraception counseling, including benefits, methods, and potential side effects.
- Providing information on vaccinations relevant to sexual health.
- Addressing myths and concerns, combating misinformation about sexual health, and raising awareness.
- Maintaining confidentiality to foster trust and open communication.
- Promoting a positive body image.

Partnerships

- Collaborating with key stakeholders, including youth, families, schools, and youth-serving organizations, to ensure

a comprehensive approach to sexual health education and services.

By fostering these practices, we can ensure that adolescents have the knowledge, resources, and support they need to make informed decisions about their sexual health, leading to healthier, more resilient communities.

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