

# ADOLESCENCE: A FOUNDATION FOR FUTURE HEALTH

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70%

The percentage of premature adult deaths due to behaviors begun in adolescence.

Close to 90 percent of young people live in low- or middle-income countries.

*In 2012, the Lancet published a special series that made the case for focusing attention and resources on adolescence, a critical stage when significant gains in health can be made and when lifelong patterns of health behavior are established. This set of three fact sheets summarizes the key data and messages from selected articles in the series.*

The first article in the *Lancet* series illustrates the importance of focusing on adolescence to improve lifelong health. Susan Sawyer and colleagues present a conceptual framework that locates adolescence within the life course and describe major influences on their health and behavior.

## Importance for Lifelong Health

Adolescence is a critical link between child health and future adult health. The definition of adolescence varies across countries and cultures, but generally begins with the biological changes of puberty and ends with the adoption of adult social roles and responsibilities. It is a period of significant physical, emotional, and social changes, presenting new health risks as well as unique opportunities for health promotion. Additionally, many behaviors that start in this period have long-term health implications: An estimated 70 percent of premature adult deaths are due to behaviors begun in adolescence.

Today's generation of young people is the largest in history. Over one-quarter of the world's population is between the ages of 10 and 24, with close to 90 percent living in low- or middle-income countries. Despite its importance and magnitude, adolescent health has historically received limited attention, and progress has been slow. Greater understanding of and investment in adolescence will deliver significant future returns in individual well-being and in national growth and development.

## A Life-Course Perspective

Sawyer and colleagues use a conceptual framework to describe a life-course perspective that highlights the dual benefits of investing in adolescents: preserving investments in childhood health and influencing the formation of positive adult health behaviors and outcomes.

Factors influencing health build upon and interact with one another: Adolescents are influenced by childhood health factors even as new risks and protective factors emerge that will affect their future health. If they enter adulthood in good health, with healthy behaviors firmly established, they stand a better chance of becoming healthy and productive adults. Similarly, risky or negative behaviors begun in youth can have lifelong consequences—an estimated 90 percent of adult smokers, for example, began smoking before age 20. Looking even further ahead, the health of today's adolescents has implications for the next generation, since the health of pregnant girls directly influences the development of their babies.

## The Burden of Disease

Adolescence is generally seen as the healthiest time of a person's life, but young people make up a significant portion of the worldwide disease burden. Progress on adolescent health has not matched the improvements made in child health—for example, a study of 50 countries found that while childhood deaths have decreased by 80 percent, adolescent deaths have only declined a little. In another *Lancet* study, author George Patton and colleagues found that the leading causes of death are injuries; maternal causes; communicable, nutritional, and perinatal diseases; and noncommunicable diseases. Mental health disorders increase substantially during adolescence—75 percent of mental disorders appear before age 24 and are the largest cause of disease among young people.

With puberty beginning earlier and marriage and other social transitions happening later, the period of adolescence has been lengthening. These changes affect health conditions and behaviors. For example, puberty is associated with the start of sexual activity, and the earlier onset of puberty may increase the period of risk for teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. Additionally, negative behaviors such as substance misuse often begin during adolescence, and the long-term impact may be magnified when adolescence begins earlier.

## Physical and Psychological Changes

Adolescence is commonly defined by chronological age (10 to 19), but health behaviors are more strongly associated with the physical changes of puberty. Research is now looking at how hormonal and other biological changes during puberty influence brain development, and the implications for adolescent decisionmaking and behavior. For example, the portion of the brain that drives reward and pleasure-seeking develops earlier than the portion that governs self-control, and may explain increased risktaking during adolescence. A better understanding of the impact of biological changes and their interaction with social and economic factors will help improve policies and programs directed at youth.

## Effects of Social Context on Health

Social determinants of health are addressed in the second fact sheet in this series. These factors influence lifelong health, but some, such as access to education, appropriate health resources, employment opportunities, and the promotion of human rights, are particularly relevant during adolescence. The variation in their experience of social determinants, risk and protective factors, biological changes, and social transitions is a primary reason for adolescent health disparities in different regions or countries, and in different groups within the same country.

## Increasing Role of Mass Media and Social Media

The landscape of adolescence is also changing: The traditional influences of family and community continue to be important, but today's youth are also affected by new factors, in particular the rapid spread and ubiquitous nature of social media.

Young people have been the earliest and most extensive users of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter. Social media has changed the nature and interaction of adolescent peer groups and increased the speed at which sociocultural norms transform and spread. Social media offers outlets for increased youth participation and visibility in policymaking and program design, and may present a new way to effectively reach large numbers of young people with health promotion interventions. On the other hand, extensive use of social media and other new technologies can have negative effects (for example, decreased physical activity or online bullying).

## The Global Agenda for Adolescent Health

Given today's large youth population and the impact of adolescent health on adult health behaviors and outcomes, attention to adolescence should be expanded beyond the Millennium Development Goals and their emphasis on sexual and reproductive health to include adolescence as a primary focus in the emerging global health agendas of mental health, injury prevention, and noncommunicable diseases. The strong networks that have formed to support child health can serve as a template for the still-emerging field of adolescent health. Including young people in the formation of these networks and the development of policies, programs, and interventions targeting adolescents will increase the relevance and effectiveness of those efforts.

## Recommendations

- Dedicate greater attention and resources to adolescent health, and make young people and their concerns a priority across all government sectors.
- Increase the visibility and knowledge base for adolescent health issues through better data collection and information systems at the national, regional, and local levels:
  - Standardize and improve measurement and collection of data on adolescent health conditions and behaviors.
  - Expand knowledge of the role of social determinants of health and of risk and protective factors.
  - Build the evidence base around effective preventive interventions.
  - Apply this knowledge to guide the development of policies and programs.
- Increase the capacity, through advocacy and training, of health care providers, researchers, policymakers, and others to appropriately and effectively identify and respond to adolescent health needs.
- Strengthen the voices and participation of young people to ensure relevant policy and program development and to empower them to shape their own health.

## Specific Actions

- Situate adolescence within the life course, emphasizing this period as a critical link between child health and future adult health.
- Promote a holistic approach to adolescent health rather than isolating specific diseases or illnesses.
- Support interventions outside the health sector that reinforce positive health behaviors and outcomes, such as education and employment.

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