

# **10 facts on Adolescent Health**



## **1) The state of adolescent health**

One in every five people in the world is an adolescent, and 85% of them live in developing countries. 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 youth, including tobacco use, a lack of physical activity, unprotected sex or exposure to violence. Promoting healthy practices during adolescence, and efforts that better protect this age group from risks will ensure longer, more productive lives for many.

## **2) HIV and young people**

Young people aged 15-24 accounted for an estimated 45% of new HIV infections worldwide in 2007. They need to know how to protect themselves from HIV and have the means to do so. Better access to testing and

counselling will inform young people about their HIV status, help them get the care they need, and avoid further spread of the virus.

### **3) Early pregnancy and childbirth**

About 16 million girls aged 15 to 19 give birth every year - roughly 11% of all births worldwide. The vast majority of births to adolescents occur in developing countries. The risk of dying from pregnancy-related causes is much higher for adolescents than for older women. Laws and community actions that support a minimum age for marriage, as well as better access to contraception, can decrease too-early pregnancies.

### **4) 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 - is increasing among other 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.

### **5) Mental health**

At least 20% of young people will experience some form of mental illness - such as depression, mood disturbances, substance abuse, suicidal behaviours or eating disorders. Promoting mental health, and responding to problems if they arise requires a range of adolescent-friendly health care and counselling services in communities.

## **6) Tobacco use**

The vast majority of tobacco users worldwide begin during adolescence. Today more than 150 million adolescents use tobacco, and this number is increasing globally. Bans on tobacco advertising, raising the prices of tobacco products, and laws that prohibit smoking in public places reduce the number of people who start using tobacco products. They furthermore lower the amount of tobacco consumed by smokers and increase the numbers of young people who quit smoking.

## **7) Harmful drinking of alcohol**

Harmful drinking among young people is an increasing concern in many countries. It reduces self-control and increases risky behaviours. Harmful drinking is a primary cause of injuries (including those due to road traffic accidents), violence (especially domestic violence), and premature deaths. Regulating access to alcohol is an effective strategy to reduce harmful use by young people. Bans on alcohol advertising can lessen peer pressure on adolescents to drink.

## **8) Violence**

Among 15-19 year olds, suicide is the second leading cause of death, followed by violence in the community and family. Promoting nurturing relations between parents and children early in life, training in life skills, and reducing access to alcohol and lethal means such as firearms can help prevent violence. More effective and sensitive care for adolescent victims of violence is needed.

## **9) Injuries and road safety**

Unintentional injuries are a leading cause of death and disability in adolescents; and road traffic injuries, drowning and burns are the most common types. Injury rates among adolescents are highest in developing countries, and within countries, they are more likely to occur among adolescents from poorer families. Community actions to promote road safety (including the passing of safety laws that are well enforced) and public education targeted to young people on how to avoid drowning, burns and falls can reduce injuries.

## **10) WHO response**

Many adolescent health challenges are closely interrelated and successful interventions in one area can lead to positive outcomes in other areas. WHO is helping countries:

- to collect, analyse and use data on adolescent health to support and inform policy-making;
- to develop evidence-based policies and programmes that support adolescent health;
- to increase access to and use of health services for adolescents;
- to strengthen contributions from the education, media and other sectors to improve adolescent health.