

Health Concerns amongst Adolescent Girls.

Even as kids reach adolescence, they need more than ever for us to watch over them. Adolescence is not about letting go, it's about hanging on during a very bumpy ride.

Ron Taffel

Adolescence is a beautiful period of life and generally a healthy one. Childhood diseases are left behind and with a little care one can build up a lifetime of good health. But this is also a period when a person is most vulnerable; the overall growth and development and also the physical, reproductive and psychological changes expose the adolescents to many health risks. Careful and unobtrusive attention to each aspect of health at this stage will help adolescents grow into healthy and responsible adults.

One of the most common health concerns among adolescent girls in our country is undernutrition and anemia. One third of the adolescent girls in India are underweight and as per the NFHS 3 data, 56 % are anemic. Poor nutrition, worm infestations and menstrual abnormalities, both menorrhagia and polymenorrhea, contribute to this easily preventable condition. Many of these girls are born with deficient iron stores because their mothers were anemic during pregnancy. Poor cognitive functions and general ill health affect their potential to achieve the best in studies and other activities. Although iron supplementation is advocated for adolescent girls, it is healthier to improve their overall diet as these girls have diets deficient in calories, proteins and other essential nutrients. Good diet is essential for proper growth and development of adolescents, for boosting their immunity and preventing conditions like anemia. Vitamin D and calcium in diet and weight bearing exercises build up the bone mass in this age. Peak bone mass is achieved by about 30 years of age and starts declining thereafter. A low peak bone mass is an important risk factor for osteoporosis later.

Malnourishment and obesity often seen in affluent adolescents can also predispose them to health problems like polycystic ovary and metabolic syndrome. Emphasizing the importance of a well balanced healthy diet and adequate physical activity at this age can go a long way in ensuring good health later.

Reproductive health issues of adolescent girls also need to be addressed.

Many myths surround the normal menstruation. Educating them about this physiological condition enables them to cope up with many of the problems and allows them normal activities with no restrictions during menstruation. Irregular and infrequent cycles are often seen for a few years after menarche and don't need any intervention. Irregular cycles with obesity, hirsutism may be due to polycystic ovarian disease but need to be investigated to rule out other causes of hyperandrogenism like congenital adrenal hyperplasia or ovarian tumor. Heavy menstrual bleeding requires complete evaluation including hemoglobin estimation and coagulation profile as some congenital coagulation disorders may manifest as puberty menorrhagia. Dysmenorrhea, if severe also needs to be investigated although mild dysmenorrhea can easily be managed with simple analgesics. In adolescents with amenorrhea, menorrhagia or severe dysmenorrhea, pelvic ultrasound may be required to rule out any pathology. Proper and timely management of any pathology so detected helps restore the health of the adolescents

Maintenance of good hygiene especially during menstruation is important. Poor menstrual hygiene and early sexual exposure can lead to reproductive tract infections with long term morbidities. Sexually transmitted infections may persist as chronic or recurrent infections and may lead to pelvic inflammatory disease involving cervix, uterus, fallopian tubes and ovaries.

Tubal infection may lead to tubal blockage and infertility later. Vaginal and cervical epithelium is immature in this age and is more susceptible to infections. Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) infection acquired at this age may later lead to premalignant or malignant changes in the cervix. Early unprotected sexual activity exposes them to the risk of HIV infection also. Teenage pregnancies may adversely affect the health of the woman and may have long term consequences especially if unsafe abortions are resorted to. Health education including sex education should be accessible to all adolescents whether they attend the school or not. They should be aware of dangers of risky sexual behaviors, about the harmful effects of tobacco, alcohol and recreational drugs. Creating healthy environment where they can channelize their energy, for example, by encouraging them to participate in sports, creative and vocational activities, teaching them life-skills will improve their health and give them self confidence.

Young girls are vulnerable to sexual abuse and sexual exploitation; providing a safe environment, educating them and protecting them is one of the most important responsibilities towards them.

Psychological problems like emotional disturbances, depression, low self esteem, anxiety and eating disorders may also affect the health of adolescent. Psychological support and counseling can overcome these problems.

Special clinics for adolescents which offer medical checkups and treatment, can pick up conditions early and timely treatments can prevent the sequelae of many diseases. Vaginal discharges, menstrual problems, acne, hirsutism and endocrine disorders like hypothyroidism are some of the conditions which may require medical attention. Adolescents should have an easy access to health care facilities. These clinics can also be utilized for counseling and dispelling any misconceptions, educating them about the merits of healthy life style, exercise and good nutrition. Most of the adolescents are vaccinated in childhood but if they are not vaccinated against tetanus, rubella or hepatitis B, vaccination can be given.

Today's youth is exposed to many pressures; although they have access to lot of information; misconceptions still prevail. Health issues need to be discussed and their concerns addressed in non-judgmental manner. Good relationship with parents, other family members, teachers and easy access to adolescent friendly health facilities will help adolescent enjoy a positive health leading to healthy adulthood.

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