Teenage health

Summary

Young people have to work through a broad range of issues as they move from childhood to adulthood. They may have to deal with changes to their bodies and their feelings and they may be thinking about having their first relationship or having sex.

Young people may also be exploring their identities in terms of their sexuality or gender identity. They may want more independence from their families, and their friends may play a more important part in their lives. Some may also want to experiment with alcohol and other drugs.

Although growing up can be an exciting time, it can also be confusing and challenging. Research shows confident young people who feel supported by their families and friends are more likely to safely negotiate issues like these. However, it is important to remember adolescence is generally a time for experimenting with risky behaviours, even with good parenting and role modelling.

Teenagers and alcohol

Alcohol is one of the most widely used drugs in Australia. According to recent surveys, around 40 per cent of young people aged 12-17 have had a full serve of alcohol and around 60 per cent of year 10-12 students have drunk alcohol at least once.

For young people, alcohol use is associated with a range of health risks, including:

- unsafe sex
- unwanted sex
- unintended pregnancy
- drink-driving and road accidents
- violence and aggressive behaviour
- criminal activity.

Teenagers and body image

Young people are at risk of developing a negative body image, where they dislike the way they look.

The related health problems for young people can include:

- crash dieting and malnourishment
- eating disorders, including anorexia and bulimia nervosa
- obesity
- steroid use (to build muscle mass).

Teenagers and bullying

Estimates suggest around one in six children are bullied every few weeks or more in Australia.

Young people are bullied by their peers for many reasons, including:

- the way they look (for example, if they are overweight)
- resisting pressure to conform
- their cultural or socioeconomic background or religion
- their academic achievements
- their sexual orientation or behaviour
- being ‘the new kid’ at school.

**Teenagers and smoking**

Despite widespread media campaigns, tobacco smoking is still popular among young people in Australia, especially young women, though the number of young people who smoke cigarettes is decreasing.

Smoking tobacco increases people’s risk of:

- cancers of the lung, throat and mouth
- reduced lung function
- asthma and other respiratory problems
- damaged senses of smell and taste
- heart disease, major heart attack and stroke.

**Teenagers and family life**

Young people can face issues relating to family life, including:

- relationship problems between family members
- family violence
- abuse, including neglect and physical, sexual or emotional abuse
- separation and divorce.

For some young people, a change in family circumstances can be positive. For example, if there has been a lot of conflict in a family, separation may be a better option.

**Teenagers and illicit drugs**

Marijuana (*Cannabis sativa*) is an illicit drug commonly used by young people. Around 17 per cent of year 10-12 students and around 14 per cent of 14-19 year olds have used cannabis at least once. Other commonly used illicit drugs include hallucinogens, amphetamines, cocaine and ecstasy, with very small percentages of 12 to 17 year olds having used one of these at least once.

It is often assumed that young people turn to illicit drugs to ease depression or anxiety, but most try drugs simply for fun. Young men are more likely than young women to experiment with illicit drugs. Those who smoke tobacco and drink alcohol are also more likely to try illicit drugs than those who do not.

**Teenagers and media**

Media, including print, television, film and online, can negatively affect young people in many ways, including:

- exposing them to extreme violence, which can desensitise them to reality
- supporting the cultural ideal that only thin is beautiful, which promotes body image problems
- reinforcing the importance of money, consumerism and status symbols.

**Teenagers and suicide**

After car accidents, suicide is the most common cause of death among young people in Australia. Research shows more young women than young men attempt suicide, but young men are far more likely to take their own lives.

In the past 10 years, the suicide rate for males aged 15 to 24 years has dropped considerably. However, young men living in rural and remote areas are more likely than those living in the city to take their own lives.

**Teenagers and sexual relationships**

Young people need access to comprehensive, factual information about sexuality to safely negotiate adult relationships.
The issues young people may be confronted with include:

- safer sex
- contraception
- sexually transmissible infections (STIs)
- unplanned pregnancy
- peer pressure
- cultural definitions of gender roles and sexual orientation.

**Teenagers and pregnancy**

South Australian figures show around three per cent of young women aged 15 to 19 years became pregnant in 2011. Of these, around 50 per cent had an abortion.

Pregnancy can be a positive time for a young woman, but she may be confronted with issues such as:

- emotional distress
- isolation or a lack of understanding and support from family and friends
- complications during pregnancy and birth
- financial pressures.

**Where to get help**

- Your doctor
- Kids Help Line Tel. 1800 55 1800
- The Royal Children’s Hospital Young People’s Health Service Tel. (03) 9611 2409
- Relationships Australia Victoria’s connectEDspace provides a hub of resources and information to help young people deal with the things they go through each day.
- Community health centre
- Women’s health centre
- Family Planning Victoria Tel. (03) 9257 0100 or freecall 1800 013 952
- Family Planning Victoria’s Action Centre (for people aged under 25) Tel. (03) 9660 4700 or freecall 1800 013 952
- Switchboard (Gay and Lesbian) Tel. (03) 9663 2939 or 1800 184 527
- Safe Schools Coalition Victoria Tel. (03) 9479 8738