

# The Second Decade

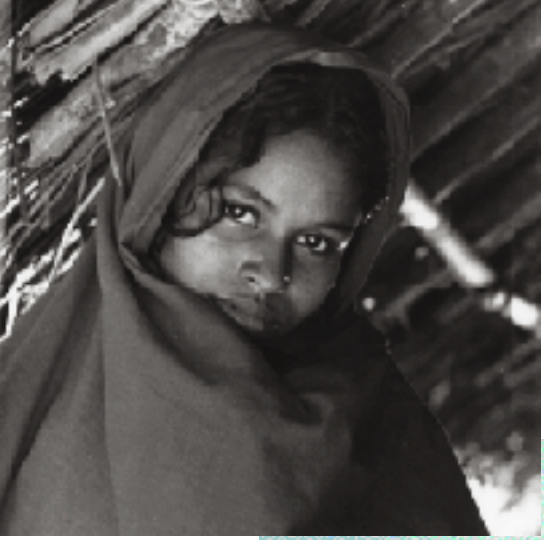


## Improving Adolescent Health and Development



Department of Child and Adolescent Health and Development  
Family and Community Health  
World Health Organization

UNICEF/NOORANI



WHO



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Adolescents are generally thought to be healthy. By the second decade of life, they have survived the diseases of early childhood, and the health problems associated with ageing are still many years away. Death seems so far removed as to be almost unthinkable.

1.

Yet many adolescents do die prematurely. Every year, an estimated 1.7 million young men and women between the ages of 10 and 19 lose their lives - mostly through accidents, suicide, violence, pregnancy related complications and illnesses that are either preventable or treatable. Millions more suffer chronic ill health and disablement that may well endure a lifetime.

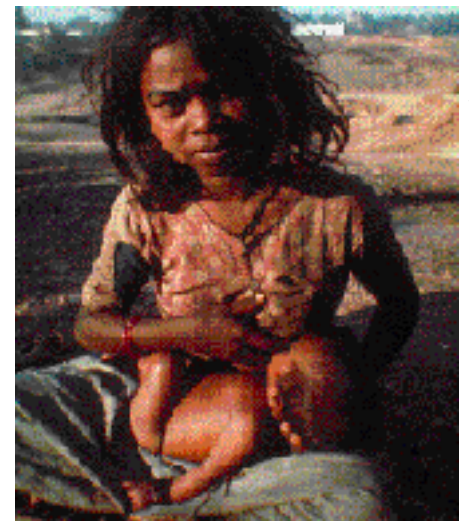
Even more importantly, most mortality in adulthood has its roots in the adolescent period. WHO estimates that 70% of premature deaths among adults are largely due to behaviour initiated during adolescence. Tobacco use, for example, typically starts before the age of 20, and frequently leads to premature death later in life. HIV infection, which is often contracted in adolescence, leads to AIDS some years later.

### **A Common Agenda**

WHO and its partners, UNICEF and UNFPA, are advocating an accelerated approach to promoting the health and development of young people in the second decade of life. The Common Agenda outlines the action needed to provide adolescents worldwide with the support and the opportunities to:

- ▶ acquire accurate information about their health needs,
  - ▶ build the life skills needed to avoid risk-taking behaviour,
  - ▶ obtain counselling, especially during crisis situations,
  - ▶ have access to health services (including reproductive health), and
- ▶ live in a safe and supportive environment.

Central to this approach is the recognition that the underlying causes of young people's health and development problems are closely connected. The solutions to these problems are also similar and inter-related.



# The adolescent

2. **O**ne in every five people in the world is an adolescent<sup>1</sup> – defined by WHO as a person between 10 and 19 years of age. Out of 1.2 billion adolescents worldwide, about 85% live in developing countries and the remainder in the industrialised world.

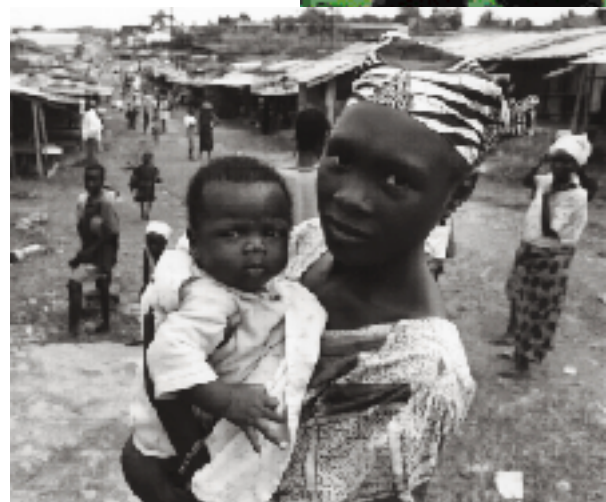
The second decade of life is a period of rapid growth and development for adolescents' bodies, minds and social relationships. Physical growth is accompanied by sexual maturation, often leading to intimate relationships. The individual's capacity for abstract and critical thought also develops, along with a heightened sense of self-awareness and emotional independence.

As the attitudes, values and behaviours that determine the young person's future begin to crystallize and take shape, society expects the adolescent to assume greater personal responsibility. This process is marked by increased exposure and experimentation. The risks inherent in "first time" behaviours – especially the use of tobacco, alcohol and other drugs, along with sexual activity – make the second decade of life a period fraught with danger.

## Diversity

There is enormous diversity among adolescents, regardless of where they happen to live. At the lower end of the age range, they consist of girls and boys, most of whom are not yet sexually active. At the upper end, they consist of physically mature young women and men, most of whom are sexually active and in many cases have children of their own.

There is also great diversity among adolescents of the same age, depending on the individual's sex, level of physical, psychological and social development, and on factors in the individual's immediate environment and within the culture of the wider society.



<sup>1</sup> The United Nations refers to people aged 15-24 as youth. In this document, the term 'young people' will be used to refer to those between 10 to 24 years.

## Factors and influences

A young person with high self-esteem and good social skills, who is clear about his or her basic values, and has access to relevant information is likely to make positive decisions about his or her health and personal development. But these decisions are not taken in a vacuum. External factors have a tremendous impact on how adolescents think and behave: the values and behaviours of their friends are increasingly important, but parents and other family members also continue to be influential.

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When adolescents feel connected to their families and when both parents are involved in their children's lives, it influences both how adolescents feel about themselves and the choices they make about behaviours that affect their health. Adolescents need to have at least one adult who is committed to their well-being.

They need adults they can turn to and trust, adults who will listen as they describe what they are experiencing and how they are coping.

Factors within the wider environment are also important. These include, for example, the mass media and entertainment, industries, community institutions, religious bodies and the political and legal system. Other important factors are access to schooling, health services, recreational activities, vocational training and economic opportunities. All too often, poverty deprives adolescents from such basic elements of development. The extent to which a young person is exposed to physical violence, social unrest, displacement and warfare can also exert a decisive influence on his or her health and development.

These factors determine the 'life chances' open to young people and underlie the decisions they make about their lives. Programmes aimed at improving the health and development of adolescents need to take account, therefore, of how these factors interact with one another and how they affect the options and opportunities open to young people.



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# Death, disability and ill health

Among the many causes of death, disability and ill health among adolescents, WHO's Adolescent Health and Development Programme has identified four as being of crucial importance:

4. **Sexual and reproductive behaviour:** Unsafe sex is a major threat to the health and survival of millions of adolescents. Each year, one in 20 adolescents worldwide contracts a curable STI. Each day, over 6,500 young people aged 10 to 24 become infected with HIV, that is nearly 5 every minute. Pregnancies that are too early are also dangerous for both mother and child. Girls under 18 are two to five times more likely to die in childbirth as women in their twenties; their children are also more likely to die during infancy.

**Tobacco use:** One of the most damaging behaviours for the long-term health of young people is the use of tobacco. Most adults smokers began during adolescence. Of the present population of adolescents worldwide, about 150 million are smokers and 75 million will die of smoking-related causes later in life.

**Suicides:** Suicides are among the three leading causes of death for adolescents, and rates are rising faster than among other age groups. Worldwide, at least 90,000 adolescents commit suicide each year.

**Road traffic accidents:** Crashes on the roads are the main cause of death among young men worldwide. These are often related to the use of alcohol or other drugs. In the United States, for example, road traffic accidents alone cause more than half of all deaths among 16-19 year-old males.

While these four issues represent major causes of death, adolescents' health and well-being are jeopardised by other issues, for example, malaria and tuberculosis which cause 12% of all deaths among adolescents globally.



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### **Adolescents: the sheer numbers...**

- ▶ *In the year 2000 there will be nearly 1.2 billion adolescents between 10-19.*
- ▶ *Worldwide secondary school enrolment is around 55%. Between 300 and 500 million adolescents are not in school.*
- ▶ *There are at least 73 million adolescent workers between the ages of 10 and 14.*

### **As they become sexually active...**

- ▶ *The majority of sexual contacts among adolescents are unprotected: among married adolescents, use of modern contraceptives ranges between 1% in some sub-Saharan Africa countries and 60% in Latin America. Only in 4 out of 19 sub-Saharan countries, do more than 10% of unmarried adolescents use modern contraceptives.*
- ▶ *Globally, 63 of every 1,000 adolescent girls (15-19 years old) give birth each year, a total of 17 million babies. These babies run almost double the risk of dying during their first year of life than babies born to older mothers do.*
- ▶ *Each day over 6,500 young people become infected with HIV, a total of 2.4 million each year representing 50% of all new infections.*

### **And other aspects of their health...**

- ▶ *Violence to and by young people is a severe problem in some regions: In some countries in the Americas, homicide is the most important cause of death among young males.*
- ▶ *Over a 100 million young people (up to 140 million) are currently likely to be vulnerable to the effects of armed conflict, not only as soldiers but also as civilians and refugees.*

- ▶ *Approximately, 4 million suicide attempts take the lives of more than 90,000 adolescents each year.*

### **Related to life style...**

- ▶ *Road traffic accidents are the leading cause of death among boys in many countries and account for 5% of all Disability Adjusted Life Years lost among adolescents.*
- ▶ *The younger an adolescent starts drinking the greater the chance of developing a clinical alcohol disorder as an adult.*
- ▶ *At present an estimated 150 million adolescents use tobacco: 75 million of them will die of tobacco-related diseases later in life.*
- ▶ *Undernutrition and stunting are prevalent in adolescents, boys and girls, in developing countries.*



UNICEF/Y. GAMBLIN

# Sex and reproduction: risks for adolescents

6.

Sexuality is a precious element of human interaction; having a child – an occasion for celebration. For many young people, however, the reality is very different. The health and survival of many millions of adolescents worldwide are at risk through unsafe sex and early childbearing.

## Early motherhood, unsafe pregnancies

Childbearing at an early age is dangerous to the health of both mother and child. Pregnancy-related complications are among the main cause of death for 15-19 year-old women worldwide. Every year, at least 70,000 adolescent women die from health problems related to pregnancy and childbirth. In addition, babies born to young mothers are more likely to suffer from low birthweight and to die of infections and malnutrition before their first birthday.

Each year, between 2 and 4 million adolescents undergo unsafe abortions, most often carried out illicitly by unqualified practitioners. As with pregnancy, the younger the woman, the greater the risks associated with abortions. In

countries such as Kenya, Nigeria and Tanzania, adolescent girls make up more than half the women admitted to hospital for complications following illicit abortions, adding to the costs of already under-resourced health systems.

## Impaired development

Whether or not an adolescent girl is married, childbearing at a young age is



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