



STAYING HEALTHY AT ANY AGE

Caring for our young people

It isn't easy being a young person. Young people face many difficulties as they move from childhood to adulthood. The main health issues faced in adolescence are detailed below:

Drugs, Alcohol & Smoking

Australia is a drug-using society – we drink alcohol or take prescription drugs for all sorts of reasons. Typically, adolescence is a period of experimentation. Alcohol is one of the most widely used drugs in Australia with 48% females and 50% males at age 17 reporting regular alcohol consumption. Alcohol and drugs are associated with a range of health risks including:

- Unsafe sex and unwanted pregnancy
- Drink driving and road accidents
- Violence
- Criminal activity.

Smoking is an addiction that causes or can contribute to a wide range of diseases and 80% of adult smokers commenced smoking before the age of 18. Research shows that young people are less likely to take up smoking if their primary role models – their parents – are non-smokers. While parents can't prevent their teenager from experimenting with alcohol and drugs, they can encourage sensible habits through good role modeling and talking about the links between drinking, taking drugs, ill health and dangerous behaviour.

Dental Health

Adolescence is the ideal age for dentists to check if the position of teeth is correct and if treatment is required.

- Always use fluoride toothpaste
- Brush teeth at least twice a day
- Have regular check-ups
- To protect against sporting injuries, have your dentist make you a custom-made mouth guard.

Body Image, Eating Disorders & Obesity

The potential difficulties associated with body image may include:

- A negative body image – where the teenager dislikes their appearance
- Crash dieting and associated malnourishment
- Eating disorders, such as anorexia and bulimia nervosa
- Obesity, since physical activity levels tend to decline
- Steroid use among young people who are keen to develop the muscular ideal.

In the Barwon-South Western region, around 1 in 4 males aged 18-24 years is overweight or obese, similar to Victoria as a whole. However, nearly 1 in 2 females aged 18-24 is overweight or obese, compared with 1 in 5 for Victoria. Problems associated with body image can be overcome with professional help and support from others.



Depression

Recent studies suggest that up to 24% of young people may have suffered at least one period of major depression by the time they are 18 years old. When young people are suffering with depression, they aren't always able to ask for help and may even refuse help at times. It is important to:

- Take their depression seriously
- Offer unconditional love and concern
- Take time to listen when they want to talk about their feelings
- Seek advice from your GP or a professional.

Sexual Relationships

Teenagers need access to frank and honest information on sexual issues if they are to negotiate adult relationships safely and happily. Issues confronted by teenagers include safe sex practices and contraception.

Protecting Our Skin

It is often difficult to convince young people of the dangers of too much sun. They are often more concerned about being 'cool' than about being sun smart. Here are some tactics you can try:

- Focus on the health and beauty effects of sun exposure
- Give them a choice of sun smart clothing and sunglasses.

Asthma

Over two million Australians are affected by asthma, including about 1 in 8 teenagers. Asthma is one of the most common reasons for admission to hospital by children, however by understanding and managing asthma, it can be kept under control. In order to stop it affecting study, sport and social activities, take time to learn about asthma and understand what the medication does and how to use it correctly.

Immunisations

Immunisation protects babies, children and adults against many diseases. There are several immunisations that are recommended in Australia for people over 12 years of age:

- Cervical cancer vaccine
- Measles, Mumps & Rubella
- Hepatitis B
- Diphtheria
- Chicken Pox
- Influenza
- Meningococcal.

Where to get more information & help

- Your doctor
- Your school nurse
- Kids Help Line 1800 551 800
- Nurse on Call 1300 606 024
- Action Centre for Young People 1800 013 952
- Better Health Channel www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Sources: Barwon Health, University of Melbourne report 2007, Better Health Channel, Action Centre for Young People, Australian Dental Association, Centre for Adolescent Health (Royal Children's Hospital May 2007), Department of Human Services

How can Barwon Health help?

Barwon Health's Child & Youth Mental Health and Drug & Alcohol programs provide specialised community, drug and alcohol and mental health services for children and young people aged up to 25 years who live in the Barwon region. Services include:

- Specialist assessment and treatment for young people with mental, emotional and behavioural difficulties, which impact upon day to day activities and relationships,
- Early intervention for young people with or at risk of developing a psychotic disorder, and
- Treatment services for young people with drug and alcohol disorders.

Under the Barwon Health Mental Health & Drug Alcohol Service, and as a central component of **headspace Barwon**, this program assists in the national campaign to promote early and effective mental health and drug and alcohol interventions for young people.

For more information about Barwon Health's Child & Youth Mental Health and Drug & Alcohol programs, please call Program Manager, Melissa O'Shea, on 5226 7410.

