

ADOLESCENT HEALTH

There are a lot of factors to consider as your child becomes an adolescent. Making sure they have healthy relationships with you and others will have an impact on their mental health, sexual health, and likelihood of engaging in risky behavior. Eating habits and physical exercise developed in adolescence can impact their health and behavior as adults. Here are some areas in which you can talk to your primary care doctor about your adolescent's health.

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS¹

Health outcomes for adolescents and young adults are grounded in their social environments and are frequently mediated by their behaviors. **Behaviors of young people are influenced at the individual, peer, family, school, community and societal levels:**

- Adolescents who perceive that they have good communication and are bonded with an adult are less likely to engage in risky behaviors.
- Parents who provide supervision and are involved with their adolescents' activities are promoting a safe environment in which to explore opportunities.
- The children of families living in poverty are more likely to have health conditions and poorer health status, as well as less access to and utilization of health care.
- Adolescents growing up in distressed neighborhoods characterized by concentrated poverty are at risk for a variety of negative outcomes, including poor physical and mental health, delinquency and risky sexual behavior.

MENTAL HEALTH²

Research has now shown that most mental disorders follow a developmental course that typically starts early in life. It can be tough to tell if troubling behavior is just part of growing up or a problem that should be discussed with a health professional. But if there are signs and symptoms that last weeks or months; and if these issues interfere with your child's daily life, not only at home but at school and with friends, you should contact a health professional.

Your child may need help if he or she:

- Often feels anxious or worried
- Has very frequent tantrums or is intensely irritable
- Has frequent stomachaches or headaches with no physical explanation

- Is in constant motion, can't sit quietly for any length of time
- Has trouble sleeping, including frequent nightmares
- Loses interest in things he or she used to enjoy
- Avoids spending time with friends
- Has trouble doing well in school, or grades decline
- Fears gaining weight; exercises, diets obsessively
- Has low or no energy
- Has spells of intense, inexhaustible activity
- Harms herself/himself, such as cutting or burning her/his skin
- Engages in risky, destructive behavior
- Harms self or others
- Smokes, drinks, or uses drugs
- Has thoughts of suicide
- Thinks his or her mind is controlled or out of control, hears voices

SEXUAL HEALTH³

It is important to talk to your child about sex and to develop a safe and comfortable environment for your child to ask questions. Don't wait for your child to ask you about sex before you have a plan in place – you will need to inform your child about the basics (vaginal, oral, and anal sex), birth control, sexual assault, sexual molestation, and your family's moral beliefs. Many children don't know that unprotected oral and anal sex can lead to sexually transmitted diseases in boys and girls. **This includes:**

- HPV — human papillomavirus (which can cause genital warts and can lead to cervical cancer in women)
- HIV/AIDS
- Genital herpes
- Syphilis

- Viral hepatitis
- Crabs
- Gonorrhea
- Chlamydia
- Trichomoniasis, and more

If you are unsure how to approach your child about some of these issues, you should consult your primary care physician. **Some questions to ask include:**

- If I suspect my child is having sex, should I confront him or her?
- Should I provide birth control for my child as a precaution or just tell them about it?
- Can being overprotective push my child into having sex before he or she is ready?
- Should my daughter's routine exam include a pregnancy test?
- Are there signs that indicate my child is having sex?

SUBSTANCE ABUSE ⁴

Illicit drug use, which includes the abuse of illegal drugs and/or the misuse of prescription medications or household substances, is something many adolescents engage in occasionally, and a few do regularly. By the 12th grade, about half of adolescents have abused an illicit drug at least once. The most commonly used drug is marijuana but adolescents can find many abused substances, such as prescription medications, glues and aerosols, in the home. **Many factors and strategies can help adolescents stay drug free:**

- Strong positive connections with parents, other family members, school, and religion
- Having parents present clear limits and consistent enforcement of discipline
- Reduced access in the home to illegal substances.

HEALTHY EATING ⁵

Nutrition refers to everything that your child eats and drinks. Your child's body uses nutrients from food to function properly and stay healthy. Nutrients include carbohydrates, proteins, fats, vitamins, and minerals. In the right amounts, nutrients give your child energy to grow, learn, and be active.

Poor nutrition can cause health problems, overweight, and obesity. Some of the health problems associated with poor nutrition can be very serious, especially as your child grows into an adult. By teaching your child healthy eating habits, you can help prevent these health problems.

Here are some ways you can help your child to make healthy choices:

- Offer healthy food options at home
- Limit fast food, takeout, and junk food
- Read food labels
- Be a good role model for your child

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY ⁶

It is important for children to stay active. Children 6 years of age and older should be active 60 minutes or more each day. Physical activity helps prevent or reduce health problems. It also helps manage weight. **Below are some other benefits to staying active:**

- It burns calories instead of storing them as body fat.
- It maintains blood sugar levels. This is vital for children who have or are at risk for diabetes.
- It lowers blood pressure and cholesterol levels.
- It helps make bones and muscles strong.
- It builds strength and endurance.
- It relieves stress and helps with focus.
- It improves sleep and mental health.
- It boosts self-esteem by helping children feel confident about their bodies and appearance.

IMMUNIZATIONS ⁷

The CDC recommends a variety of immunizations for children 7-18 years old. **For 2017, the CDC's recommendations are as follows:**

- Flu (Influenza)
- Tdap (Tetanus, Diphtheria and Pertussis)
- HPV (Human Papillomavirus)
- Meningococcal
 - MenACWY
 - MenB
- Pneumococcal
- Hepatitis B
- Hepatitis A
- Inactivated Polio
- MMR (Measles, Mumps and Rubella)

The CDC provides [information](#) about which vaccines are recommended for each age group, but you should always consult with your primary care physician with any questions.

¹ <https://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/topics-objectives/topic/Adolescent-Health>

² <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/child-and-adolescent-mental-health/index.shtml>

³ <https://familydoctor.org/talking-kids-sex/>

⁴ <https://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/adolescent-development/substance-use/drugs/index.html>

⁵ <https://familydoctor.org/nutrition-healthy-eating-for-kids/>

⁶ <https://familydoctor.org/keeping-your-child-active/>

⁷ <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/schedules/downloads/teen/parent-version-schedule-7-18yrs.pdf>