



GOOD HEALTH TAKES “TEEN WORK”

Conflicts often arise as adolescents’ relationships with their friends and family evolve. Parenting these “changelings” as they don a variety of styles, attitudes and personas can present its own set of challenges. Both parents and adolescents alike may look to others for support and guidance. Healthcare professionals particularly sensitive to the special needs of young adults, fill an important role as they monitor changes in adolescents’ physical, mental and social development – encouraging their young patients to eschew unhealthy behaviors such as smoking, drinking and promiscuous and unsafe sex, and instead practice good nutrition and exercise.

Adolescents are known to test boundaries and engage in risky behavior. Practitioners should be ever on the lookout for emotional, physical and sexual abuse, and should encourage their patients to resolve conflicts without resorting to violence. Finally, practitioners should try to learn of any lingering learning problems or difficulties at school, and assist patients in managing this particularly stressful time in their lives. It may be wise for the practitioner to be certain the parents of their young patients are sending the same message, and that they also understand the importance of reinforcing these recommendations.

Nutrition

As adolescents go through puberty, their peak growth usually occurs between the ages of 12 and 16 for boys, and 11 and 13 for girls. Coupled with erratic eating habits, they are subject to nutritional deficiencies, particularly calcium and iron. Emotional upsets often manifest through changes in food consumption, leaving them vulnerable for eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia.

Amazingly, approximately 45 percent of skeletal mass of adolescents is formed during this time period. Sufficient quantities of calcium must be acquired from the diet to build dense bones – essential for reducing the risk of osteoporosis later in life. In addition, vitamin D and phosphorous, as well as weight-bearing exercise encourage the growth of strong bones. As adolescents develop and increase their blood volume and muscle mass – and as young women commence their menses – they also become susceptible to iron-deficiency anemia, one of the most common diet-related deficiency diseases in adolescents.

Another major nutritional problem in adolescents is obesity, a condition that often persists into adulthood. Lack of exercise not only contributes to obesity, but also plays a role in the development of chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes and hypertension, in adults.

Healthcare practitioner may provide nutritional counseling to help adolescents avoid dietary deficiencies while maintaining an adequate weight. The effective healthcare professional may encourage adolescents to eat breakfast every day, enjoy a variety of foods, drink sufficient water, and exercise.

Sports Injuries

According to a spokesperson at the Mayo Clinic, approximately 30 million kids in the United States participate in athletics: “Teens play sports to have fun, learn new skills and spend time with their friends. Nevertheless, they aren’t small adults. You’ll need to help them get the right balance of academics, sports and rest, and teach them to make healthy choices.”

One of many common injuries plaguing young athletes is Osgood-Schlatter disease – a condition in which the quadriceps muscle pulls on the insertion point of the patellar tendon on the tibial tuberosity (the bump on the shin bone below the knee cap). This knee pain is more noticeable when actively running, jumping or sprinting up or down stairs, and is common most popular school sports, including soccer, lacrosse, track, gymnastics, and even ballet dancing. It may also occur in preteen or teenage growth spurts and is considered one example of “growing pains”. Because of these and other musculoskeletal-developmental issues, healthcare practitioners should be familiar with and promote the use of protective gear and perform appropriate warm-ups before exercise. Ensuring that physical activity is a regular part of a person’s daily regimen helps to avoid injury as well. Strengthening exercises are recommended, as is the icing of affected areas to prevent pain and swelling. In addition, acupuncture may be used to relieve the pain in the area.

Sleep

Despite what they say, adolescents need more sleep than they think. Convincing them to go to bed at a reasonable hour may present challenges, however. Teenagers require a minimum of nine hours of sleep a night. Sufficient rest boosts performance in school and in athletics. A 2005 pilot study demonstrated that acupuncture is useful for the management of chronic fatigue syndrome in adolescents by improving energy levels and the duration and quality of sleep. Chiropractic care helps with spasm, pain, and joint dysfunction of the neck, back and extremities – another cause of lost sleep.

Obesity

Noting the escalating rate of obesity in children and adolescents in the United States, Marilee Murphy, dean of New York Chiropractic College’s School of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine, explains, “The impact of the issue not only touches the personal lives of the teens and their families, but creates a tremendous burden on the healthcare system.” Although there is little published data regarding acupuncture’s efficacy in treating overweight adolescents, Murphy alludes to “data from adult studies [that] indicates that acupuncture should be considered a potential treatment intervention for overweight adolescents.” She also refers to adult studies that demonstrated how “acupuncture, when combined with standard care approaches of reduced energy intake and increased energy expenditure, results in greater reductions in weight compared to standard care alone.”

Common Ailments

Teens suffer from many common ailments, including acne, asthma, back and knee pain, and headaches. Many of these maladies may be resolved through chiropractic, acupuncture, or nutritional counseling:

- Chiropractic treatment of adolescents with mild scoliosis may reduce their spinal curvature.
- Chiropractors can assess, diagnose, and treat spinal nerve problems and biomechanical issues that contribute to adolescent sports-related injuries (affecting the ankles, knees, hips, etc.).
- Facial acne may be improved with acupuncture and Oriental medicine.
- For adolescents who have chosen to become vegetarians, nutritionists can help to plan a vegetarian diet that provides the necessary nutrients. They can also assist adolescents in general with eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia.

“Growing up” is a unique challenge. Healthcare professionals who attempt to distinguish between adolescent syndromes and adult ones can run into complications. Youthful people appearing to be healthy may nonetheless suffer life-threatening diseases. Managing chronic illness in adolescents is essential, though it can be particularly difficult as they grow through all of the normal physical, social and emotional changes.