

# UNDERSTANDING ADOLESCENTS AND THEIR HEALTH NEEDS

## Who are Adolescents?

- The terms '*adolescents*' and '*young people*' refer to the age group *12-24 years*

### IN NSW:

- There are 1.25 million young people aged 12 – 24 years (17.4% of the population)
- 24% of the population are from a Non-English speaking background (NESB)
- There are approximately 34,000 young people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background

## Adolescent Health Problems

- The majority of adolescent health problems are psychosocial – a consequence of health risk behaviours, developmental difficulties and exposure to social and environmental risk factors
- Many health risk behaviors and lifestyles are established in adolescence and continue into adulthood leading to chronic health problems – e.g. tobacco use; dietary habits; alcohol use
- Young people lack knowledge about how and where to seek help for their health concerns

## Adolescent Health Status

The leading causes of death and illness in the age group 12 – 24 years are:

- *Accidents and injuries* – both unintentional and self-inflicted
- *Mental health problems* – e.g. depression; eating disorders; suicide
- *Behavioural problems* – including substance abuse

For detailed information on young peoples' health status, see the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare website: [www.aihw.gov.au/childyouth/index.html](http://www.aihw.gov.au/childyouth/index.html)

## Understanding Adolescence

Adolescence is characterised by rapid change in the following areas:

- *physical* – puberty (physical growth, development of secondary sexual characteristics and reproductive capability)
- *psychological* – development of autonomy, independent identity and value system
- *cognitive* – moving from concrete to abstract thought
- *emotional* – shifting from self-centred to mutually caring relationships
- *social* – peer group influences, formation of intimate relationships, decisions about future vocation

### **The Developmental Perspective of Adolescence**

It is important for GPs to understand young people, their behavior and needs from a developmental perspective. *Determining the developmental stage of the adolescent provides a guide to:*

- the adolescent's physical and psychosocial concerns
- the young person's cognitive abilities and capacity for understanding choices, making decisions and giving informed consent
- appropriate communication strategies and interventions

### **Young People from Non English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB)**

NESB young people may be exposed to a variety of stressors associated with the challenge of growing up “between two cultures”, including:

- conflict between traditional cultural values and those of the mainstream culture
- migration, resettlement and acculturation difficulties
- language problems
- exposure to racism or discrimination
- confusion about their ethnic identity
- refugee experience
- experience of torture or trauma
- lack of access to culturally appropriate health services

### **Cultural Sensitivity**

In order to provide effective health care to young people from diverse cultural backgrounds, GPs need to:

- be aware of how the young person's cultural background impacts upon their developing adolescent identity
- adopt a respectful and non-judgmental approach in dealing with differing cultural norms and practices
- ask the young person how they identify themselves within the mainstream culture and their own culture
- consult with specialist NESB services or workers if unsure about cultural issues
- explain to both young person and their parents the doctor's role in treating the young person - respect parents' wishes to be involved and actively encourage their participation

### **Key Roles for the GP**

- Provision of comprehensive health care appropriate to the adolescent's developmental needs and cultural background
- Detection, early intervention and education for health risk behaviours
- Promoting young peoples' access to GP services and the broader health system
- Promoting collaborative patient management by ensuring appropriate referral, and coordination with other health professionals