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Adolescent Wellness

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Adolescence describes the transition from childhood to adulthood. Because this has been viewed as the healthiest period of life, many people mistakenly assume adolescents have few, if any, health care needs. This is untrue. Though many adolescents remain healthy, others develop significant health challenges, like diabetes, eating disorders, depression, and hypertension. Many also develop dangerous behaviors. Just as infants and toddlers need monitoring for healthy growth and development, so too do teenagers.

Important growth and development occurs during adolescence. In addition to the physical changes of puberty, teens experience mental, emotional, and social changes. Adolescent well child care (WCC) helps monitor youth for irregularities during this time of major change. It also assists in establishing habits that will facilitate a healthy lifestyle in their adult years. Ideally, a primary care provider trained in adolescent health provides your child's WCC.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends yearly WCC from age 11 through 21 years. As with WCC for infants and toddlers, these visits monitor for healthy growth and development, screen for early signs of certain diseases, and educate about healthy habits. They also screen for dangerous behaviors that are prevalent during adolescence.

Adolescence spans a large time frame, but can be divided into three phases: early adolescence (11-14 years old), middle adolescence (15-17 years old), and late adolescence (18-21 years old). Certain changes are associated with each phase. As with all stages of development, however, each child has its own unique pace, and sometimes their own order of attaining milestones.

Generally, children enter puberty during early adolescence. During this period they also develop the ability for abstract thinking. This enables them to understand and question certain concepts about the world, rules, and people



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they previously could not comprehend. Middle adolescence is often a time of individuation. Teens try to understand who they are, and often begin to test parental boundaries. Late adolescence often marks the development of adult attributes such as having a sense of purpose and creating emotionally intimate relationships.

Mental and emotional development is extremely important during adolescence. Many adolescents worry whether or not they are developing “normally.” Annual WCC visits give an opportunity for repeated reassurance that they are developing healthily. It also assists teens in developing a healthy and realistic body image. Furthermore, youth receive accurate health information that helps counter misinformation circulating among their peers.

Adolescent well child visits also have benefits for parents. They offer an opportunity to receive answers and reassurance about concerns regarding their child’s development or behavior. Parents also can receive tips regarding effective and age appropriate communication with their teens, especially about sensitive topics like sex, drugs, and peer pressure. The health promoting information the pediatrician gives to teens can also reinforce some of the things parents have been teaching at home.

Adolescence is a dynamic time, both for the youth and for their family. Promoting wellness through routine and professional health care can help your child successfully transition from childhood to adulthood. It can also support you during this exciting time.

Be well!