

Adolescents' health from a public health perspective

What can we learn from HELENA?

by

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The period of adolescence is in many ways one of the most crucial stages of life, with similar important processes taking place at the same time in a multidimensional space. The biological process of rapid growth and maturation towards adult phenotype is coinciding with a complex process of developing and consolidating individual behavioral and social characteristics.

Although, in this stage of often emotional turmoil and psychosocial exploration, health and health determinants are not the most important preoccupation of adolescents, it all the more deserves full attention of health professionals as the basis is formed for their future health and quality of life.

It has been shown that lifestyle habits that are adopted during adolescence often track into adulthood and in that way already lay down the seeds for divergences in healthy life expectancy and patterns of chronic disease occurrences.

The HELENA project was essentially developed with a view to a better understanding of the health status and its determinants in the current European cohort of adolescents entering the 21st century. To that end, a large battery of known disease risk determinants have been measured in 10 cities from 9 European countries in a highly standardized way.

On the basis of the collected data and the analyses carried out so far, it can be concluded already that the overall picture of risk profile in this young age group is not very good and far from what could be expected from a public health system with optimal performance. Dietary habits, activity and fitness patterns, body composition indices as well as biochemical profiles show that considerable proportions of young people have adopted lifestyles that lead them to present with suboptimal to actually very worrying risk burdens already at the eve of their adult life.

The twentieth century has produced an increase of life expectancy in the Western world of about 30 years on average. The main challenge for the 21st century seems to be to consolidate this gain into the future. While infectious disease elimination was the main challenge in the previous century, the main public health challenge today seems to be to elaborate ways to create environments (physical and societal) that facilitate the adoption of healthy lifestyles especially among younger people. Scientific evidence and results from the HELENA study should be used as a basis for translating scientific data into an adequate health policy development and implementation.

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