

# Teenagers

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Advances in medicine and public health have made many diseases preventable or easily treatable. Today our health is largely threatened by the way we live - by lifestyles with too much to eat and drink, excessive speed on the highways and unrelieved tension in our daily routines. We are endangered by what we do, such as smoking, and by what we don't do, such as exercise. The good news is that we can do something about it.

By practicing seven simple health habits, experts say Americans could add up to eleven years to their lives, not to mention better health during those years.

1. Eat three regular meals daily and avoid snacks.
2. Include breakfast every day.
3. Get moderate daily exercise.
4. Sleep seven or eight hours a night.
5. Don't smoke.
6. Maintain recommended body weight.
7. Adults over 18 - moderate alcohol use.

This handout is intended to encourage you to take these choices seriously and to make your decisions wisely, for the sake of you and your family.

## Nutrition

As a teenager, when the body is developing rapidly, it's especially important to eat those foods with the nutrients you need for good health, whether you eat at home or away from home.

It's also important to avoid such practices as "binge" eating, self induced vomiting and "starvation" diets. They usually cause excessive weight loss and, often, serious medical problems. Beware of pills, fads and gimmicks that might help you lose pounds on a short term basis, but can hurt your health in the long run. Remember, any good weight control program calls for increased exercise, eating a well balanced diet of nutritious foods, consuming fewer calories and if necessary, losing weight gradually, usually just one to two pounds a week.

## Physical Fitness

Exercise can be fun, but it's more than that. It can make you feel better, look better, work and think better, and maybe even live longer.

Pick exercises that keep your heart beating at a fast rate for at least twenty minutes continuously, and exercise at least three times a week if possible. Some good examples include swimming, biking, jogging or brisk walking, aerobic dancing and cross country skiing. It's more important to choose a type of exercise you enjoy and an exercise time that's convenient for you so you'll stick with it long enough to see results. Don't be discouraged by muscular aches and pains when you start - they're a sign your body's getting into shape.

## Smoking

Cigarette smoking is dangerous to your health. You know that, but maybe you think it really doesn't apply to you because you're young. Besides, you can always quit later - you think.

Some bad effects of smoking are immediate and obvious. It makes your fingers and teeth yellow, plus it makes your breath, hair and clothes smell like a smoky room. It also makes you much more likely to get sick with sinusitis, bronchitis and the common cold. Not to mention cigarette smoking really bothers some people, and they may resent you for "sharing it" with them.

The long term effects of smoking include narrowed blood vessels, poor circulation, difficulty breathing, and the higher likelihood of developing diseases like cancer, emphysema and heart disease.

The decision about whether to smoke is yours. Don't underestimate how difficult it is to quit once you start. Remember that despite what the cigarette ads suggest, most people don't smoke. Smoking doesn't make you sexy. Smoking doesn't make you popular. Smoking doesn't make you thin. If you don't smoke, don't start. If you do smoke, make some definite plans to quit. Get help if you need it. You **can** do it.

## Alcohol

Drunk driving kills more teenagers than any other cause, and accounts for more than half the nations' traffic deaths each year.

Alcohol is a drug. If you're not careful, it can control you, instead of you controlling it. Drinking too much dulls your thinking, awareness and coordination. It can make you a less likable person - less able to do well in

school, or perform on the job, or get along with your friends and family. Your drinking problem becomes other people's problem too.

Be in control. Don't allow yourself to be pressured into drinking. Remember that you don't need to "apologize" for not drinking. Never drive after drinking, even if you've only had a small amount. Don't ride with a driver who has been drinking. Instead, take a taxi or call a friend or relative for a ride.

## Seat belts and Helmets

Wearing a seat belt can double your chances of escaping injury or death in a crash. It helps you to absorb the crash impact, and prevents you from being thrown out of the vehicle, perhaps through the windshield, where chances of survival are much less.

Seat belts can also help you avoid accidents. They hold you upright and provide support in case you have to maneuver quickly in an emergency.

Most traffic accidents occur within two miles from home, and usually at relatively slow speeds. Always wear your seat belt, no matter where you're going, whether or not you're driving or a passenger. If you are driving, encourage your passengers to buckle up too!

When riding a bicycle, you'll be sharing the road with vehicles traveling at speeds much greater than your own. Should you ever be caught in a situation where you are forced off the road, or worse, are struck by a vehicle, it is absolutely crucial that you have a helmet on to avoid permanent neurological damage or paralysis. Wearing a bicycle helmet reduces the risk of serious head injury by 75%. Helmets are lightweight and comfortable. They should be used on every ride since falls and crashes can happen in parks, paths and driveways, not just on streets.

## Sex

Because sex has many potential consequences, the decision to have sex should not be made in a moment of passion. The decision should be given thought *before* a sexual situation arises. Sex can lead to unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STD's), including AIDS, hepatitis, Chlamydia, gonorrhea, genital warts and herpes.

If you're not comfortable discussing sex and birth control with your partner, you're not ready for sex. If you're thinking about becoming sexually active, you should understand the facts about sexual health. Many teenagers lack sexual knowledge and rely on friends for information, which is often incorrect. Be sure to talk with your family doctor to get the facts straight.

The truth is that pregnancy can occur even if you only have sex once. If you're going to have sex, be sure that you're using a reliable method of birth control and consider the possibility that you may acquire a sexually transmitted disease, many of which are not curable, some of which can be fatal. It is not possible to tell if you partner has an STD. In the end, the best way to avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases is to say

"no" and to wait until you are ready to commit to a single partner for the rest of your life.

## Immunizations

**Measles** can cause inflammation of the brain, mental retardation and other disorders. **Rubella** can result in miscarriage or birth defects during pregnancy. Therefore, check to be sure that you've had at least two measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) immunizations since age 12 months. Usually, the first immunization is given at age 12-15 months and the second immunization is given around age five.

**Tetanus** can cause painful convulsions and death, even though it's rare. It's important to get a tetanus booster every ten years as an adult. However, it is now recommended that teenagers have their first booster dose around age 11-12.

**Hepatitis B** vaccine is now being given to all newborn infants. However, this is a relatively new recommendation and most teenagers born before 1991 did not receive this vaccine. Hepatitis B is transmitted through body secretions, shared needles and blood transfusions. It is recommended that all adolescents 18 years and younger be vaccinated with Hepatitis B. It is a three shot series given over at least 6 months.

The **chickenpox** vaccine is recommended for those teenagers over 11 who lack a reliable history of chickenpox since it is often a much more serious illness in adolescents and adults. Adolescents and adults age 13 and older are given a booster 4 weeks after the initial immunization.

**Hepatitis A** is a serious liver disease which can cause flu like illness, jaundice (yellow skin), diarrhea, and severe stomach pains. The risk for getting hepatitis A in Idaho is twice the national average, and three times the national rate in Washington. The vaccine for hepatitis A has been available since 1995, but only since 2000 has it been recommended (although not required) for all Idaho children under age 18.

**Meningococcal** disease is the leading cause of bacterial meningitis in the US. About 30% of patients die or have serious complications. Current recommendations are to immunize freshmen students entering high school or college. Immunity lasts many years.

### In Summary

- It is clearly to your advantage not to smoke, or to stop smoking if you've already started.
- Alcohol related driving accidents kill more teenagers than any other cause.
- The best way to avoid accidental pregnancy and STD's is to abstain from sex until you are ready to commit to a single lifetime partner.