

MEC Dhlomo has two messages for the youth - exercise and be health conscious

18 February 2011 – The MEC for Health, Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo had two key messages for the youth of KwaZulu-Natal that he delivered during a visit to Ntambanana municipality today: physical activity and a health seeking behaviour.

Adolescents complete their physical, emotional and psychological journey to adulthood in a changing world that contains both opportunities and dangers. Most adolescents are full of optimism and represent a positive force in society, an asset now and for the future as they grow and develop into adults. When supported, they can be resilient in absorbing setbacks and overcoming problems.

Undertaking at least 150 minutes a week (as recommended by the World Health Organisation) of moderate physical activity for people aged 18 and over can reduce the risk of non communicable diseases, including breast and colon cancers, diabetes and heart disease can reduce the risk of ill health and non-communicable diseases.

"Physical activity has a strong role to play in reducing the incidence of certain diseases," says Dr Dhlomo. "Physical inactivity is the fourth leading risk factor for all deaths, with 20% of the young population not physically active."

Increase in inactivity

Physical inactivity is increasing and has major implications for ill health, along with other non communicable diseases such as cardiovascular diseases and diabetes. Physical inactivity is associated with:

Thousands of deaths per year;
premature deaths (people aged under 60 years); and
Around 10% of diabetes and ischaemic heart disease burden.

Adolescent health

Most young people are living a health risky life. A Youth Risk Behaviour Study conducted and reported in 2008 on a sample comprised of grades 8, 9, 10 and 11 learners selected from public schools in the nine provinces showed the following;

38% of learners had reported ever having had sex, with 13% of them reporting their age of initiation of sexual activity as being under 14 years old.

Learners reported that 34% of them had no physical education classes in schools and 29% watched TV or played computer games for over 3 hours per day.

15% of learners reported carrying weapons and 36% reported having been bullied in the past month, 19% belonged to gangs during the past six months and 10% had ever been forced to have sex.

In the past six months a quarter of learners (24%) reported having experienced feelings of sadness or hopelessness, 21% had considered suicide and 21% had attempted suicide; 29% of those who attempted suicide required medical treatment.

Drug consumption varied from 13% for ever having smoked dagga, 12% for inhalants, 7% for cocaine, 7% for 'tik' and 7% for Mandrax.

Learners reported alcohol consumption was 50% for ever having drunk alcohol and 35% for having drunk alcohol in the past month, and 29% for having engaged in binge drinking in the past month.

More and more young people aged 15 to 24 die each year. A much greater number of young people suffer from illnesses which hinder their ability to grow and develop to their full potential. A greater number still engage in behaviours that jeopardize not only their current state of health, but often their health for years to come. Nearly two-thirds of premature deaths and one-third of the total disease burden in adults are associated with conditions or behaviours that began in their youth, including: tobacco use, a lack of physical activity, unprotected sex or exposure to violence.

Dr Dhlomo says; "Promoting healthy practices during adolescence, and taking steps to better protect young people from health risks is critical to the future of communities health and social infrastructure and to the prevention of health problems in adulthood."

Some of the main health issues affecting young people are described below.

Early pregnancy and childbirth

About 10% of deliveries are by girls aged 13 to 17 years. The risk of dying from pregnancy-related causes is much higher for adolescents than for older women. The younger the adolescent, the greater the risk. Those adolescents who do become pregnant should be provided with quality antenatal care and skilled birth attendance. Where permitted by law, those adolescents who opt to terminate their pregnancies should have access to safe abortion.

HIV

Fifteen to 24 year olds accounted for an estimated 9% of all new HIV infections among adults in 2008. Every day, more young people get infected and there are more young people living with HIV/AIDS. Young people need to know how to protect themselves and have the means to do so. This includes condoms to prevent sexual transmission of the virus. Better access to HIV testing and counselling (HCT) will inform young people about their status, help them to get the care they need, and avoid further spread of the virus. As conditions increase the vulnerability of young people to HIV infection, an effective government HIV prevention strategy aims to address factors that drive the epidemic. Musa Njoko (a known HIV Positive activist) warned women against turning a blind eye on sexual abuse of children in their homes. She told the crowds of young people that she has lived with HIV for 17 years and advised them to stay away from alcohol and drug abuse.

Mental health

In any given year, about 20% of adolescents will experience a mental health problem, most commonly depression or anxiety. The risk is increased by experiences of violence, humiliation, devaluation and poverty, and suicide is one of the leading causes of death in young people. Building life skills in children and adolescents, and providing them with psychosocial support in schools and other community settings can help promote mental health.

Harmful use of alcohol

Harmful drinking among young people is an increasing concern. It reduces self-control and increases risky behaviours. It is a primary cause of injuries (including those due to road traffic accidents), violence (especially domestic violence) and premature deaths. Brief interventions of advice and counselling when alcohol use is detected can contribute to reducing harmful use.

Promoting nurturing relationships between parents and children early in life, providing training in life skills, and reducing access to alcohol and lethal means such as firearms help prevent violence. Effective and empathetic care for adolescent victims of violence and ongoing support can help deal with both the physical and the psychological consequences of violence.

MEC Dhlomo concludes by saying; "Complementary actions are needed to promote healthy development in adolescents; to prevent health problems or problem behaviours, and to respond to them if and when they arise. They need interventions to decrease and to mitigate their vulnerability. These include: information and skills; a safe and supportive environment; and appropriate and accessible health and counselling services."

Adolescents are at risk of early and unwanted pregnancy, of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV and AIDS, and vulnerable to the dangers of tobacco use, alcohol and other drugs. Many are exposed to violence and fear on a daily basis. Some of the pressures adolescents are under, or the choices they make, can change the course of their young lives, or even end them. These outcomes represent personal tragedies for young people and their families. They are also unacceptable losses that put the health and prosperity of society at risk. Addressing the needs of adolescents is a challenge that goes well beyond the role of health services alone.

- Ends

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