

# **IMPORTANT HEALTH INFORMATION FOR ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG WOMEN.**

Adolescence and young womanhood represents the peak of development and maturation of reproductive system. The understanding of the normal function of sexual and reproductive system is sometimes lacking among adolescents due to poor access to information.

Parents have an important role to play in educating their children about sexual and reproductive health. However, some parents often fail in this role because they consider it a taboo talking about sex with children.

Adolescents and young women are sometimes unable to access the right information about sexual and reproductive health and this puts them at risk of getting wrong information from other sources such as; their ill-informed peers, social media and older people who have ulterior motive of taking advantage of them. Furthermore, their ignorance of available women health services at community health institutions preclude them from utilizing the services when needed. This sometimes leads to suffering in silence. The consequences, such as unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, dangerous abortion, infertility, HIV and death, resulting from wrong information could have a devastating effects on the young lad, families and the community.

Our organization aims to educate adolescents and young women about sexual and reproductive health with the hope to empower them with necessary information to understand their body and to know when to seek further help.

The section will address twenty common diseases affecting African adolescents and young women.

## **1. Breast pain**

As part of the physical changes at puberty, breast bud usually starts to grow between 8 and 13 years. It is normal for one of the breasts to grow bigger than the other one at the beginning and some adolescents may experience breast pain. The breast different sizes and pain are part of the normal changes of puberty which gets better with time. Reassurance and painkiller are usually sufficient to deal with the pain.

Failure of breast development by 13 years of age warrants consultation with health professionals

## **2. Breast lump**

If you feel any abnormal breast mass, you have to see a health practitioner who will obtain full history and examine you. However, most of the breast mass at the adolescent age are usually caused by things that do not pose any threat to health or life.

## **3. Pimples (Acne vulgaris)**

This is a common skin problem of young adolescents and it may persist in adulthood in some of them. The distribution of the pimples usually involves the face and this may cause considerable shame if appropriate help is not obtained.

## **4. Menstrual bleeding**

Menstruation is a normal process of monthly shedding of inside of the womb which manifests as flow of blood from womb through the vagina. Adolescents and young women should be given adequate information before the onset of this phase of life because most of the health problems of adolescents are related to menstruation.

## **5. Painful menstrual period (Dysmenorrhea)**

Menstrual bleeding may be associated with pain in the central lower part of the abdomen. The pain is usually described as cramping in nature and radiates to the back and thighs. It usually starts few hours before the onset of the bleeding. If the pain is severe enough to prevent you from going to school or carrying out your daily routine activities you need to talk to a doctor. A mild to moderate pain can be relieved with over the counter pain killer (Painamol or Ibuprofen)

## **6. Absent of menstrual cycle (Amenorrhea)**

If you have not started menstruating by the age of 16 years or older, you need to seek medical advice at any nearby primary health centre. Similarly, for those who have been menstruating before, if you do not see your menstruation for at least six months you also need to seek medical help at the primary health care.

## **7. Premenstrual Dysmorphic Disorder (PMS)**

Some adolescents may experience emotional changes, such as depression, irritability or loss of interest in what they normally enjoy doing. This can occur about one or two weeks before the onset of their period. If the symptoms are severe enough to affect the social and educational role of the adolescents, it is important to consult your health provider.

### **8. Heavy menstrual bleeding**

Menstruation is the peak of all the puberty changes which usually occurs between 12 and 13 years. In the first year of onset of menstruation, the menstrual cycle occurs every 21 to 45 days with each bleeding lasting 3 to 7 days. A normal blood flow requires 3 to 6 pads per day. Any bleeding that interferes with normal well-being or quality of life of an adolescent should be investigated promptly.

### **9. Endometriosis**

This is the abnormal growth of cells (endometrial cells) similar to those that form the inside of the uterus but in a location outside of the uterus. Endometriosis is most commonly found on other organs of the pelvis.

### **Causes**

The exact cause of endometriosis has not been identified however, the most common symptoms of endometriosis includes:

- Pain (usually pelvic) that usually occurs just before menstruation and lessens after menstruation
- Painful sexual intercourse
- Cramping during intercourse
- Cramping or pain during bowel movements or urination
- Infertility
- Pain with pelvic examinations

Other symptoms that can be related to endometriosis include

- lower abdominal pain,

- diarrhea and/or constipation,
- low back pain,
- chronic fatigue
- irregular or heavy menstruation,
- painful urination, or
- bloody urine (particularly during menstruation).

If you have any of these symptoms, you are advised to see a doctor.

## **10. Sexual assault**

Sexual assault is used to describe a range of sexual offences, this ranges from showing indecent images to another person, to kissing or touching them, as well as penetration of the person's body with a body part or object.

Sexual assault is sometimes called other names, such as Sexual abuse, rape, indecent behaviour, indecent assault, sexual molestation, incest, child sexual abuse, child sexual assault, touching, 'feeling up', sexual harassment.

### **How do you know if you have been sexually assaulted?**

You have been sexually assaulted, when a person:

- Does something sexual that makes you feel uncomfortable; or
- Touches your body when you do not want them to, this may also be referred to as sexual assault

There are different kinds of touching or behaviour which can be described as sexual assault, it depends on one or two of the following:

- Where and how it happens;
- What the perpetrator is thinking when they do it;
- The age of the victim;
- What the victim thinks; and
- What a reasonable person would

If someone does something to make you feel that you have been assaulted, you can seek advice at the nearest health centres. This also applies even when you don't want to report to police, or if you have reported to the police, but they do not believe that a crime has been committed.

If you are not sure whether you have been sexually assaulted or not, you can talk to your teacher, parents or health professionals. There are specially trained people who can help you understand what has happened to you and what your options are.

### **It is not your fault!**

Victims of sexual assault are often blamed. People make it seem like they asked to be raped or assaulted because of how they looked or dressed, or where they were at the time. This is not right. It is never a victim's fault.

### **Sexual assault is a crime – report it!**

Sexual assault is always a crime. It is most commonly committed against women and children by people they know, such as boyfriends, fathers, neighbours, step-fathers, bosses, uncles, husbands or partners. Victims of sexual assault should not be scared to report the perpetrators.

Sexual assault is grouped into different types of offences.

The various categories of sexual assaults include:

#### **Sexual Act –**

This occurs when:

- A person shows you their penis or masturbates/touches their penis in public;
- A person makes you look at porn (sexual pictures or videos) in a magazine, on a computer, phone or on television;
- A person sends your naked picture to other people or posts it online (sexting or cyber-bullying may fit in this category); or
- Any other sexual act that would make most people feel very uncomfortable.

## **Sexual touching**

This is when a person touches you in a sexual way, on your breasts, vagina or anus; It also includes touching over the top of or under your clothing that does not penetrate in any way; Kissing; or when a person makes you touch their penis, vagina or anus.

## **Sexual assault**

Sexual assault occurs when a person has sexual intercourse with you when you do not want to or you cannot consent; and that person knows you do not want to or cannot consent, or has no reasonable grounds to believe you consented.

## **What does 'sexual intercourse' mean?**

Sexual intercourse is where:

- A person puts their penis, fingers, hand, tongue or an object into your vagina or anus; or
- A person puts their penis or vagina or anus on your mouth; or
- You put your vagina, anus or mouth on someone else's penis, vagina or

The law says that sexual intercourse involves some type of penetration by genitals or body parts into the mouth or genitals of another person. If an object is used to penetrate the vagina or anus it is also sexual intercourse.

If you are unsure about what has happened, it's a good idea to talk to your school counsellor.

Sexual assault can also include:

- Getting or giving oral sex when you do not want to;
- Being forced to put objects into your own vagina or anus;
- Being forced to do these things to another person, animal or object;
- Penetration or something being inserted into your body or the other person's body;
- Being forced to have sex or perform sex acts on another person who might also be a victim;
- Being made to perform sex acts on an animal or object or weapon of some

If a person attempts to do any of these things to you they can be charged with an offence.

Sexual assault can also occur in aggravating circumstances

### **What are aggravating circumstances?**

This is a more serious form of sexual assault. A person can be charged with 'aggravated sexual assault', for example if:

- They physically hurt you when they sexually assault you;
- You are under 16 years old;
- They use a weapon during the sexual assault;
- Other people are present and/or involved in the sexual assault;
- You have a severe disability;
- The abuser is an authority figure like a teacher, carer or religious leader.

### **What is consent?**

Consent is freely agreeing to do something. Consenting to have sex or sexual contact means:

- No one is pressuring you or forcing you;
- No one threatening you or threatening someone or something you love;
- You want to have sex and have not changed your mind;
- You have the ability to stop when you want;
- You are 16 years or older;
- You are awake and conscious;
- You are not overly affected by alcohol or drugs;
- The person you have sex with has not lied about their identity or led you to believe they were someone else.

### **You are not able to legally consent**

If you are under the age of 16 you cannot legally consent to sex. Even if you agree or 'go along with' the perpetrator your consent is negated by the fact that you are not legally allowed to give consent. This means it is like you did not consent at all.

## **11. Teenage Pregnancy**

Teenage pregnancy is pregnancy in a woman that is between age 14 and 19 years. Pregnancy during the adolescence constitutes important health and social problem in South Africa because woman at this age are not physically, emotionally and financially prepared. Most of the teenagers. Pregnancy occurs when a man deposit sperms in the vagina of a woman during sex.

Once a woman starts seeing her menstruation regular is an indication that she may fall pregnant from sexual exposure.

Pregnancy can be prevented with use of contraceptive. The available contraceptive methods include; condom, oral contraceptive, injectable, implant and intrauterine cavity device. These are readily available at the local clinics and health facilities. Contraceptive should be used by teenager is sexually active and does not want to have a child (De Wet, Amoo, & Odimegwu, 2018)

## **12. Vaginal discharge:**

Vaginal discharge is flows of little fluid out of vaginal opening. This is part of normal body process of cleaning the vagina and the womb. The fluid is usually of small quantity, thin, colourless and odourless. The thickness of the discharge may change during ovulation, sexual stimulation or pregnancy. Vagina, just like any other part of the body may be infected by germs leading to change in the nature of vaginal discharge. An increase in the amount of vaginal discharge, abnormal odour, yellow or green colour, itchiness and pain in the vagina are symptoms of infection that medical attention is required (Mitchell, 2004)

## **13. Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs)**

These are infections that are spread from one person to another through sexual contact. Teenagers are at increased risk of getting STDs once they are sexually active. Common examples of STDs are HIV, Human Papilloma Virus (HPV), Gonorrhoea, Syphilis, etc

Some of the disease will manifest immediately as abnormal vaginal discharge, low abdominal pain and fever. However, some of the STDs may not give any symptoms.

While some of the SDs like vaginal discharge, pelvic inflammatory diseases, and vagina ulcers can be cured others like HIV and herpes are managed symptomatically. If STDs are not promptly and properly treated that may cause chronic pain, infertility and HIV diseases. If you are



experiencing abnormal vaginal discharge, low abdominal pain or fever, you need to seek medical attention at the nearest clinic.

STDs can be prevented by proper usage of condom and avoiding multiple sexual partners. Medications are also available at the clinic to reduce the risk of getting HIV before and after sexual exposure.

#### **14. Unsafe abortion**

One of the options available to unwanted pregnancy include termination of such pregnancy. Any woman may request for termination of pregnancy if the pregnancy is less than 3 months (Guttmacher, Kapadia, Naude, & De Pinho, 1998). This service is readily available at Primary Health Care Facilities (Day Hospital, District Hospital and Community Health Centres) where trained health professionals perform the procedure.

Any abortion that is performed by unskilled person or outside of health care facilities is unsafe and may endanger the life of a woman. Other problems that may results from unsafe abortion include; damage to the womb, bleeding, damage to the intestine, and infection.

#### **15. Polycystic ovarian Syndrome (PCOS)**

This condition results from excessive male hormone production in woman and it manifests as obesity, irregular menstrual cycles, and abnormal hair growth on the face, chest and abdomen.

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