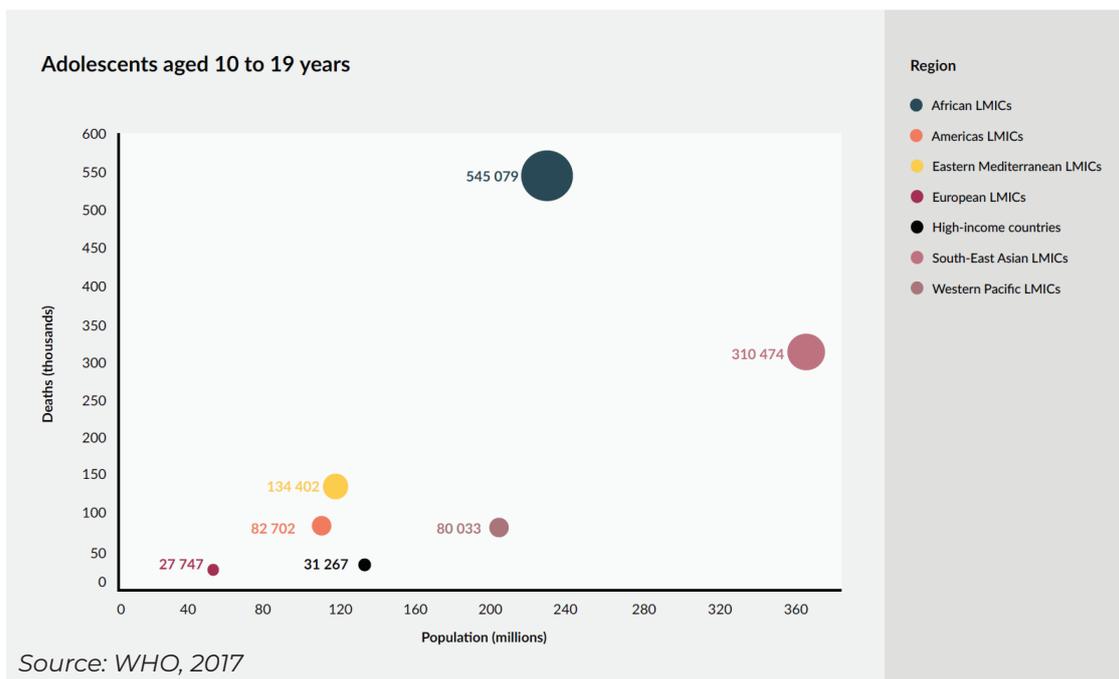


ADOLESCENT NUTRITION: WHY IT IS IMPORTANT

Adolescence is a nutritionally vital period in a person’s life. Rapid physical growth, hormonal changes, and psychosocial development increase an adolescent’s nutrient demands. During this time, dietary behaviours and lifestyle patterns take root and shape one’s lifelong health.

Adolescents represent only one-sixth (18%) of the world’s population and may seem like a narrow target for nutrition advocacy. There is a general misconception that adolescents have lower health risks as compared to other vulnerable groups, therefore they don’t need as much attention. However, a WHO study shows that in 2015, more than 3,000 teenagers died every day (or 1.2 million die a year) from largely preventable diseases. In low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) in Southeast Asia alone, more than 300,000 teenagers have died that year (Figure 1), and two of its top causes are diarrhoeal diseases and tuberculosis. Meanwhile, majority of adolescents in the region suffer from iron-deficiency anaemia and skin diseases.

Figure 1. Estimated adolescent deaths by population size and modified WHO region, 2015



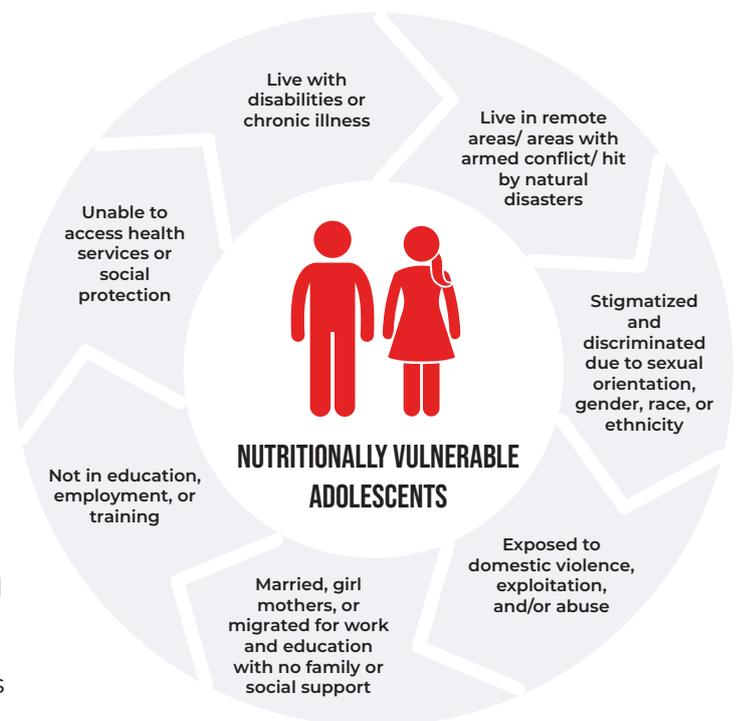
Despite the large percentage of adolescents suffering from nutritional deficiencies, their health and nutrition are still largely overlooked. In most developing countries, health systems have focused on servicing mothers, young children, and the elderly and have failed to provide initiatives that meet the specific nutrition and health needs of adolescents.

Adolescent nutrition requirements vary from younger children and adults due to their distinctive and rapidly evolving physical, sexual, cognitive, and emotional development. Their complexity and diversity (e.g. culture, nationality, wealth, education, family) have made addressing their nutrition needs challenging. Some adolescents are highly exposed to health risks, others have poor access to health care, while others experience adverse social repercussions as a result of poor health.

Double burden of malnutrition among adolescents

A significant number of adolescents in Asia suffer from nutritional deficiencies largely due to 1) unavailable and inaccessible good quality food; 2) poor mean caloric intake; 3) inability to properly digest, absorb, and utilise food; and 4) social discrimination against girls.

Malnutrition in adolescence, if ignored, can have lifelong consequences. Undernutrition (stunting and wasting) and overnutrition (obesity) among adolescents have become prevalent in LMICs. Nutritional deficiencies have resulted in thinness and stunting. Stunting has been linked with impaired cognitive development, poor school performance, reduced economic productivity, and poor reproductive health outcomes in females. Wasting has been associated with delayed maturation, poor muscle strength that constraints capacity for physical work, and reduced bone density later in life. Obesity increases the risk of early onset of chronic diseases such as Type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and hypertension. The consequences of malnutrition in adolescents are likely to compound health issues that they could carry into their adulthood.



Anaemia and early pregnancy

Anaemia severely impacts adolescent growth and development. In Asia, iron deficiency anaemia among adolescents is high, the prevalence ranging from 12-100%. Many of them were already anaemic when they entered adolescence and did not receive proper iron supplementation during childhood. This puts adolescent girls at higher risk for maternal morbidity and mortality.

Early pregnancy presents major health risks to both the girl and her child. Adolescent mothers face higher risks of eclampsia, puerperal endometritis, and systemic infections. Malnutrition can cause poor pregnancy outcomes, which is mostly observed among pregnant adolescents with low socio-economic status. Babies face higher risks of having low birth weight, being delivered preterm, or experience severe neonatal conditions.

Therefore, addressing the needs of adolescents needs is an important step towards breaking the vicious cycle of intergenerational malnutrition, chronic diseases, and poverty. It requires the engagement of many sectors, including health, education, food systems, water and sanitation, and social protection. Developing effective, joint programming with these sectors involves applying a wide range of coordinated strategies.

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