

Most Lifelong Bad Habits are Preventable by the Young Adult Stage of Life

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Parenting has an effect on choice young adults make, but even those teenagers who were given guidance about certain health issues didn't necessarily continue to make wise choices when they reached young adulthood.

According to the National Institutes of Health, by the time they reach early adulthood, a large proportion of American youth have poor health habits that contribute to three leading causes of preventable death in the United States: smoking, obesity, and alcohol abuse. This finding is according to the most comprehensive survey of adolescent health behavior undertaken to date and was designed to measure the effects of home, family and school environment on behaviors that promote health.

"When they were young teenagers, most of the participants [in the study] had fairly healthy behaviors," said Christine Bachrach, Ph.D., "What's really alarming is how rapidly healthy practices declined by the time the participants reached young adulthood."

The participants responded to questions on diet, inactivity, obesity, tobacco use, substance use, binge drinking, violence, reproductive health, mental health, and access to health care. For nearly all groups, diet, activity level, obesity, health care access, tobacco, alcohol and illicit drug use, and likelihood of acquiring a sexually transmitted disease worsened as the youth reached adulthood.

By the time they had reached adulthood the participants were more likely to be obese, to frequently eat fast food, and to be sedentary. They were also less likely to have health insurance, to receive health care when they needed it, or to receive regular dental and physical health examinations.

There was a "dramatic" increase in behaviors related to 3 leading causes to preventable deaths. "These findings show the importance of ongoing prevention toward smoking, poor diet and physical inactivity, and alcohol consumption, early in the life course."

Most of the results showed Asians and whites were at lowest risk, while African Americans and Native Americans were at highest risk.

Among young white women, the proportion reporting no weekly physical exercise was 5 percent during the adolescent years, but was 46 percent in early adulthood. Similarly, among white males, the proportion that was obese grew from 14 percent in the teen years to 19 percent when they became adults.

On the positive side, participants were less likely to experience feelings of depression at adulthood than when they were adolescents, less likely to have suicidal thoughts, and less likely to be victims or perpetrators of violence.

Whites, for example, were healthier during earlier adolescence than most other groups, but experienced the greatest declines upon reaching adulthood. By the time they reached adulthood, whites had the highest rates of smoking (31 percent for males, 28 percent for females) and white males had the highest rate of binge drinking (67 percent).

At adulthood, African Americans were the least likely to smoke cigarettes (13 percent for males, 8 percent for females) to binge drink (33 percent for males, 15 percent for females) or to use hard drugs (5 percent for males, 2 percent for females). When they were adults, African Americans (18 percent) and Native Americans (16 percent) were more likely to develop asthma than were other groups.

Among female adults, African Americans (55 percent) and Asians (53 percent) were the least likely to exercise, and among males, white and African American were the least likely to exercise.

The study didn't try to determine why there was a decline in healthy behaviors from the teenage years to young adulthood, but based on my time as a campus minister, I'd attribute a lot of it to a shift in lifestyle that provided more freedom and less parental control.

What can parents do? Continue to stress while the kids are at home the value in healthy behaviors and model them yourself. It is not helpful to use a "do as I say, not as I do" approach. While there is no assurance that our kids will return to healthier decisions as they age, common sense would suggest that seeing their parents make healthy choices throughout their own life stages would have a positive influence.