

Health Matters – June 2009

Adolescent Well Care: What Every Parent Should Know

Well checks are an important part of every person's healthcare. In the first two years of your child's life, well child checks happen every 2 to 3 months. These visits are often associated with vaccinating your child. Once your child reaches school age, however, many kids stay away from the doctor's office unless they are sick. Parents are often surprised by the recommendation that their child be seen for well checks every couple of years through high school, even when the child does not need vaccines.

So, what is the point of a well check? It is an opportunity for your teen to be an active participant in his or her own health. Beginning at age 12, families are encouraged to have the child spend part of the visit interacting alone with the doctor. This helps the adolescent develop a trusting and confidential relationship with his or her health care provider. A number of topics will be discussed at the visit, many of which are similar to the discussions in an adult preventive visit.

Vaccination recommendations for teens have changed in the past several years. Most students entering junior high receive three to four vaccines. Some of the vaccines are new, such as Gardasil which helps prevent cervical cancer and genital warts. Other vaccines have changed, such as the bacterial meningitis vaccine and the tetanus booster. Vaccine-preventable diseases still cause a significant amount of illness and absences from school and work, even in the St. Croix Valley. The most frequent of these illnesses in the past years has been pertussis (whooping cough). To find out more about recommended teen vaccines, visit www.cdc.gov or the Teen Health Facts page at www.stillwatermedicalgroup.com.

Some of the time during the visit is spent asking about your adolescent's lifestyle, including diet, sleep, and exercise. This is an opportunity to encourage behaviors which lay the foundation for maintaining a healthy adult life. Most adolescents do not eat enough fruits and vegetables, nor do they drink enough water or get enough calcium in their diets. Teens typically also get a couple hours less sleep a night than their bodies need. They often don't recognize that their difficulty falling asleep may be related to their pre-sleep activities. Adolescents who are involved in competitive sports likely get the recommended amount of physical activity in a week during their sport seasons. Teens who are not competitive athletes should have a discussion about their activities to uncover easy and fun ways to get the recommended amount of exercise.

The healthcare provider will also ask about your teen's relationships with family and friends. Adolescence is a time of significant social and emotional stress. Mental health disorders, such as anxiety and depression, are common in teens. Surveys indicate one in eight adolescents suffer from depression; but only 30% of them receive any help. Within Washington County, over 10% of 9th and 12th graders admit to having suicidal thoughts in the last year. During the teen well check, the provider asks questions about the

adolescent's emotional and mental well-being. If any concerns are discovered, follow-up care can be coordinated, providing your teen with sometimes life saving interventions.

One responsibility of an adolescent healthcare provider is to inquire about risk-taking behaviors. Even in St. Croix Valley, drug use and alcohol use are prevalent in our junior highs and high schools. The 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey indicates 13% of 9th graders and 33% of 12th graders in Washington County have participated in binge drinking in the last 2 weeks (5 or more drinks in a row). The same survey found that 27% of 12th graders admitted to driving after alcohol or drug use. Sexual activity is also not uncommon in our Washington County schools; 18% of our 9th graders and 46% of our 12th graders have had sexual intercourse.

It is well documented that teens who have a couple of adults whom they trust and feel supported by have significantly decreased risk-taking or self-injurious behaviors. A healthcare provider can be one of the support people in your teen's life. Parents need to know that parts of the discussion between the teen and the healthcare provider are confidential. This allows for an open and honest discussion about sensitive subjects, such as substance use, sexual health, and mental health. If concerns arise that your adolescent is hurting himself or herself, being hurt by someone else, or going to hurt someone else, the healthcare provider will then involve parents in the discussion and care plan.

Regular well checks during junior high and high school help your teen begin taking responsibility for his or her health. The variety of topics discussed at these visits can make a significant difference in the life of your teen. For more information on adolescent well care, please visit Teen Health Facts at www.stillwatermedicalgroup.com.



Nicki Groves, MD, FAAP, is a board certified pediatrician at Stillwater Medical Group. She is a graduate of the University of Minnesota Medical School. She is a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics, the East Metro Medical Society, and the Minnesota Medical Association.