

Wider health impacts for young people with a mental illness

If diagnosed, a young person's mental ill-health often becomes the single focus. This focus may miss potential wider health impacts which can accumulate with longer-term health consequences. Annual health check-ups, early interventions and access to allied health professionals are needed.

KEY ISSUES

Young people who suffer mental ill-health have a greater risk of poorer physical and sexual health outcomes. Despite increased physical and sexual health risks, a young person's mental illness often becomes the single focus.

The risk of poor physical health outcomes accumulates from the earliest stages of mental illness. The accumulation of these health effects may not be immediately obvious with many effects only evident at a later age.

Early interventions that improve behavioural aspects can minimise the physical and sexual health effects linked with mental illness. Access to allied health professionals, such as dieticians, exercise physiologists and sexual health nurses could also reduce the wider health impacts of mental ill-health.

Existing disparities in the physical and sexual health risks of marginalised young people are likely to be exacerbated by mental ill-health.

Physical health

People with a mental illness experience higher rates of physical illness than the rest of the population and die up to three decades earlier.

- tobacco smoking rates are between 33% and 73% compared with a national rate of 13%
- levels of obesity around 2x the general population.

Motivating young people with depression and anxiety to change their behaviours around physical activity and nutrition can improve their physical and mental health outcomes.

Among young people with first-episode psychosis a heightened risk of rapid weight gain due to the side-effects of some treatment medications compounds the physical health effects of their illness.

Sexual health

There is a link between mental ill-health and sexual risk-taking behaviours which increases the health risks.

- 13-17 year olds with severe depression are 3x more sexually active and 1.5x less likely to use a condom.

It is important that young people are aware of the potential side-effects of some medications which can decrease sexual desire and cause dysfunction and dryness.

KEY RESPONSES

Earlier and improved rates of access to health services has the potential to increase awareness of the potential wider health impacts of mental ill-health and reduce their impact through:

- A trial Youth Health Management Plan to increase monitoring and treatment of the physical and sexual health of young people with mental ill-health as part of the Australian Government's packaged care policy for people with a severe or complex mental illness. A range of allied health and/or nursing services would need to be available through the plan.
- Considering drugs with fewer, or lower, negative physical or sexual effects as the first-line options when determining treatment for young people.

A number of opportunities exist to improve the availability and delivery of services for young people, including:

- Developing the capacity of services and health professionals to deliver complete health care for young people.
 - Allied health
headspace centres from ten Primary Health Networks which have General Practitioners on staff could be trial sites for the inclusion of a dietician, exercise physiologist and sexual health nurse.
 - Mental health nurses
The role of Mental health nurses could be expanded to include accredited training in the monitoring of physical and sexual health symptoms. Incentives for nurses to undertake this training could be considered.
 - Professional requirements
To facilitate training in the monitoring and treatment of physical and sexual health across disciplines continuing professional education in this area should be a requirement of professional membership and registration.
- Extending the five-year targets for achieving improved physical health outcomes for young people with psychosis in the HeAL statement to other disorders.

There is a need to increase our understanding of the impact on young people of mental ill-health, the wider health impacts and what can be done. Steps to achieve this would include:

- Having a specific focus in the forthcoming Fifth National Mental Health Plan on the particular needs for planning the direction and provision of mental health services for 12-25 year olds. This focus should include the early intervention and treatment of the wider health implications of mental ill-health for young people.
- Improving the collection of data on the mental, physical and sexual health of young people by expanding existing health surveys or developing a targeted survey.
- Increasing research to identify effective early interventions for the wider health impacts experienced by young people with a mental illness.



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