

POSHAN GHAR OP-ED

The Adolescent Years: Foundation for Lifelong Well-being

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Adolescence is a pivotal period that profoundly influences physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Yet, today's adolescents are surrounded by processed foods, sugary drinks, and sedentary lifestyles that threaten their long-term health. Habits formed during these formative years often continue into adulthood, making it crucial to act early. This op-ed by Dr. Anshu Sharma calls for collective effort from adolescents, parents, schools, and communities to nurture healthier habits and build a stronger, more resilient generation for the future.

The Adolescent Paradox: Growing Fast, Eating Wrong

Adolescence is a time of rapid physical, emotional, and cognitive growth. It's a time when poor habits can take shape. During this phase, the body undergoes major changes such as accelerated height, weight gain, hormonal shifts, bone density, and brain development. Which is why adolescents need nutritious diets to fuel their development. Yet many adolescents face dietary imbalances leading to undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, and overweight or obesity.

In India, [more](#) than 41.9% of adolescent girls are underweight, yet over 4

overweight or obese — a contradiction that illustrates the “triple burden malnutrition”: undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, and overweight, existing side by side.

This imbalance has ripple effects: girls deficient in iron or calcium face complications during pregnancy, while boys with poor nutrition may experience reduced physical and cognitive performance.

Why Are Adolescents at Risk?

Changing lifestyles have influenced how adolescents eat, move, and rest.

- **Convenience culture:** Easy access to fast food, energy drinks, and processed packaged snacks means high salt, sugar, and fat intake.
- **Screen-heavy routines:** Academic pressure and entertainment keep adolescents glued to screens for hours, reducing outdoor play and physical activity.
- **Peer influence:** Eating out, skipping meals, and consuming “trendy” food often linked with social identity and social acceptance.
- **Limited awareness:** Nutrition education is rarely integrated into schools, especially in rural areas, leaving adolescents unaware of what constitutes a healthy and balanced diet and what healthy eating truly means.

The result is a generation that may be eating more but with limited or no nourishment.

The Hidden Toll on Health

The effects of this changing lifestyle and eating habits are showing early. Recent data indicate that nearly one in five urban adolescents in India eats fast food at least three times a week. The impact goes far beyond weight gain.

Adolescents are reporting higher rates of hormonal imbalances, [early](#) on diseases, and Polycystic Ovarian Disease among girls. Poor dietary patterns and eating habits also disrupt metabolism, sleep [cycles](#), and energy levels. This also lowers psychological well-being, which affects concentration, academic performance and overall mood. Mental [health](#) concerns are rising, with growing body image issues and eating [disorders](#), such as anorexia and bulimia. For instance, a [study](#) found body-image dissatisfaction in 20.2% of adolescents aged 14–19 in India. Social pressures, stress, and reduced physical activity compound these issues, making adolescents more vulnerable to anxiety and low self-esteem.

Nearly 80–85 per cent of bone [mass](#) develops during adolescence. Poor or limited activity can slow this growth and increase the risk of osteoporosis in later life, especially for girls. Low intake of calcium, vitamin D and protein also weakens muscle strength and endurance, making it harder for adolescents to stay active and participate in sport and maintain healthy energy levels.

When diet and movement are compromised, each problem amplifies the other. As physical fitness weakens confidence and mood, while emotional strain reduces motivation to eat well or stay active. This creates a cycle in which muscle strength, bone density, cardiovascular health, concentration, emotional resilience and overall quality of life suffer together.

Image: UNICEF

Fuel for Growth: Eat Well, Move More

The good news is that solutions are within reach. Adolescence offers a unique window of opportunity, when healthy choices can reverse early damage and lay the foundation for lifelong well-being.

The World Health Organization recommends 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity each day. Regular movement strengthens bones and muscles, supports cardiovascular health and improves mental well-being. When paired with a balanced diet, it can significantly improve outcomes for adolescents.

Key nutrients such as calcium, iron, zinc, vitamin A and protein are essential for growth. Foods like milk, leafy greens, pulses, nuts and seasonal fruits should be included in the diet.

part of daily meals. Limiting fried and processed foods, sugary drinks and high in salt or fat is equally important.

Physical activity also improves nutrient absorption, builds stronger bones and prevents obesity. Every form of movement counts — from cycling and skiing to dancing or walking.

Turning the Tide: Multistakeholder Efforts for Adolescent Health

Recognising the importance of adolescent health, the Government of India has launched several initiatives to improve nutrition and promote physical well-being among children and adolescents.

The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare's Rashtriya Kishor Swasthya Karyakram (RKSK) addresses a wide range of adolescent health needs, including nutritional health, menstrual hygiene, substance misuse, and sexual and reproductive health. It delivers these services through peer educators, Adolescent-Friendly Health Clinics and community outreach. The National Programme for Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases (NP-NCD) promotes early screening and awareness on diet, physical activity and maintaining a healthy weight. Under the Anaemia Mukt Bharat, adolescents receive weekly iron and folic acid supplementation and counselling on diets that support growth, energy and metabolic health. The PM-POSHAN Scheme provides nutritious meals to school children, helping reduce malnutrition.

To promote an active lifestyle, initiatives such as the Fit India Movement encourage regular physical activity, sports participation and school fitness assessments. Let's Fix Our Food, a joint initiative by ICMR-NIN, PM-POSHAN and UNICEF India, strengthens adolescent nutrition literacy and food environments to prevent overweight and obesity. Civil society organisations also play an important role. Such as, [Sukarya](#) NGO runs adolescent groups where girls and boys

about balanced diets, physical activity and managing peer influence through games, role plays and discussions.

The recent launch of the National Anti-Obesity campaign, initiated by the Government of India in collaboration with public health organisations, highlights the importance of reducing oil, salt and sugar consumption. The campaign promotes healthier school canteens, improved food labelling, regular physical activity and community awareness drives targeting adolescents and caregivers.

These collective measures aim to curb unhealthy eating patterns and promote sustainable lifestyle changes among adolescents. Together, they strengthen the reach, relevance and responsiveness of adolescent health interventions. Their success depends on awareness, consistent practice and strong community support.

Image: [UNICEF/UN0591657/Bhardwaj](#)

Call to Action: Everyone Has a Role

The choices adolescents make about what they eat, how active they are, and how they care for their physical and mental well-being matter for lifelong health. These choices influence their future health, productivity, and overall quality of life. It thus becomes everyone's responsibility to ensure that adolescents are growing up making informed decisions.

Adolescents can begin with small, mindful changes, such as skipping sugary drinks on a sunny day and choosing water, lemon water or coconut water; taking the stairs or a short walk whenever possible, and opting for fruit-based treats over fried snacks. Building awareness about healthy options and understanding the long-term consequences of their choices is an essential step in behaviour change.

Parents can lead by example with home-cooked meals, consistent routines, and family mealtimes that encourage healthier decisions. Schools can integrate nutrition education, reinforce life skills, and promote physical activity beyond sports. Communities can create safe, inclusive spaces where young people can move, play, and interact, while also encouraging discussion, peer learning, and supportive environments that enable adolescents to adopt and sustain healthy behaviours.

Because even small lifestyle shifts made with the right understanding and support can lead to a stronger, healthier generation.

Have stories, insights, or case studies on health, nutrition, WASH, child protection, or social behaviour change? We would love to hear from you. Reach out at arpita.d@zealgrit.com.

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