



American College of Pediatricians
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Patient Information Handout

Decreasing the Risk of Teen Depression

Major depression is common and can prevent a person from performing even the basic activities of life. Unfortunately, the prevalence of major depression has been increasing, especially among adolescents. The most recent data revealed an estimated 2.2 million American adolescents aged 12 to 17 had at least one major depressive episode *with severe impairment* in the past year. Below are 8 healthy habits that may protect against depression.

1. Build and maintain family connection

The National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health followed over 40,000 adolescents, and one of the first reports found adolescents who were connected to their parents were less likely to experience depression and suicidal ideation.

Some ways to enhance family connection:

- Make family meals a priority
- Play, laugh and be active together
- Have a family game night once a week
- Spend time outdoors together
- Volunteer in the community together
- Attend religious services together
- Assign chores to each person in the family

2. Help limit screen time and social media

Several studies demonstrate a relationship between increased screen time, social media and increased risk of depression. One study found increasing odds of depression for every hour spent in front of a screen. Social media not only renders children more vulnerable to comparing themselves unfavorably to others, and becoming victims of cyber bullying, but is also addicting. Screens take time away from other beneficial activities.

3. Encourage healthy nutrition

The healthiest diet is one rich in fresh fruits, vegetables, healthy grains and nuts and cold water fish such as salmon. Adolescents with depression have a greater consumption of unhealthy and processed food. In addition, levels of omega-3 fatty acids, folate, vitamin B12, iron, zinc, and selenium were lower in people experiencing depression.

A multivitamin with minerals taken each day would certainly cause no harm – and may be helpful in the prevention of depression. Omega-3-fatty acid supplementation may also be beneficial.

4. Promote adequate sleep

Since additional sleep is required during times of rapid growth, it makes sense that adolescents need more sleep. The relationship between poor sleep and depression has been long recognized. Over scheduling, and the use of screens in the bedroom (including cell phones and TVs) contribute to poor sleep. Help your child to avoid over scheduling, eliminate electronic media from their bedrooms, and get off electronics at least one hour prior to bedtime.

5. Encourage exercise & outdoor activities (nature)

Research confirms what many intuitively know, that exercise and spending time outdoors can decrease the symptoms of depression in adolescents.

6. Encourage keeping a gratitude journal

Keeping a gratitude journal has been shown to improve mental health. Writing three things each night for which they are grateful is another way to encourage teens to improve their mental well-being.

7. Encourage volunteering

Volunteering has many potential benefits, including community engagement and improved emotional well being. Volunteering helps adolescents develop a sense of purpose for their lives and helps give their lives meaning. Volunteering together with your teen will not only improve their well being, but it will also serve to bond and connect parents and children – which, as noted above, is also protective against adolescent depression.

8. Encourage sexual abstinence

Adolescent sexual activity is an independent risk factor for developing low self-esteem, major depression, and attempting suicide. In addition, the use of hormonal contraception has been associated with an increased risk of depression in adolescents. Talk with your sons and daughters about all of the benefits of abstinence, including a decreased risk of depression. There isn't a condom, pill or shot to protect their minds or their hearts.

Encourage your adolescent to begin or continue at least some of these healthy habits—and become a role model yourself. Everyone in your family will benefit.