

Menarche, menstrual problems and reproductive tract infections among adolescents in rural and urban areas of northern Karnataka in India

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Extended Abstract

Adolescence is the stage of transition from childhood to adulthood, and applies to girls as well as to boys. It is during this period girls and boys experience important body changes especially in their reproductive system, get mental maturity and learn and adopt to social life including knowledge and skills through education and work. For a proper physical and psychological growth of adolescents, this period has increased demand for nutrients intake such as foods rich in proteins, energy, vitamins and minerals and adequate household and social care and support. Several studies have confirmed the need for special attention to improve the health and nutritional status of adolescents. The health problems faced by adolescent girls are irregular period of menstruation, menstrual hygiene and reproductive tract infections and the major nutritional problem faced by them appears to be anaemia. So, adolescents need help and guidance not only in health care, menstrual hygiene and nutrition but also in decision-making, problem solving, critical thinking, developing interpersonal skills, coping with stress and managing emotions.

A study to address the reproductive health needs of adolescents was undertaken in rural and urban areas of Dharwad district of Northern Karnataka state in India during 2006. The study groups included adolescent girls and boys in the age group 13-19 years and their parents. This paper tries to assess the adolescents' knowledge, practice and problems experienced with regard to menarche, menstruation, reproductive tract infections including sexually transmitted infections, and HIV/AIDS based on personal questionnaire interview and FGDs with the adolescents. Altogether 372 adolescent boys and 422 adolescent girls were interviewed and 10 focus group discussion (FGD) sessions were conducted with adolescent boys and girls.

Most of the adolescent girls and majority of the adolescent boys were aware of menstruation in girls and its periodicity. On the other hand just 3 percent of the girls and only three-fifths of the

boys were aware of spermarche in boys. Most of the girls were aware of menarche and menstruation only after they actually experienced it and nobody had informed them about it before they had actual experienced it. However after menarche they received information from mothers, sisters and female friends. The mean age at menarche was worked out to 13.8 years in rural areas and 13.5 years in urban areas and mean age at spermarche was estimated at 17.4 years in rural areas and 16.7 years in urban areas. Though most adolescent girls were aware of menstruation only after they experienced it, majority of the girls in both rural and urban areas reportedly felt normal and not frightened on seeing their first menses.

According to nearly one-half of the girls in rural areas and more than three-fifths in urban areas, there was no formal celebration of their menarche and for majority of others it was just a simple ceremony. Majority of girls in both rural and urban areas reported change in dress, increase in household activities, restriction of movement and reduction in outside labour work after attaining menarche. With regard to use of sanitary pads almost all girls in rural areas and over two-thirds in urban areas reported that they were using only cloth to absorb menstrual bleeding. The proportion of girls using sanitary pads in urban areas was 23 percent in the age group 13-15 and 33 percent in the age group 16-19. The corresponding figures for rural areas were 5 percent and 7 percent respectively. Further, more of school-going girls were using sanitary pads than of not school-going girls.

Except for about 10 percent of girls all others reported that they were having regular periods. As many as 40 percent of urban girls and 36 percent of rural girls reported of experiencing problems of abdominal pain or discomfort during menstruation and the proportion did not vary very much by age. Most of these girls said that they reported their problems to their mothers and in some cases to their sisters, doctor and health staff. Among those who experienced problems only 40 percent said that they had sought treatment and others did not seek any treatment.

Nearly half of the girls in rural areas said that they refrained from touching children during menstruation but it was very less in urban areas. This indicates that this taboo is still commonly prevailing in the rural areas. Very few girls reported that they had any experience of RTI symptoms. Most of the girls and boys in rural and urban areas were aware of HIV/AIDS and its modes of transmission. However knowledge on RTI/STI and their symptoms was found to be negligible among both boys and girls and in rural and urban areas.