



Teenage Pregnancy



An insight into adolescents

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines adolescents as “persons between the ages of 10 and 19 years, with specific health and developmental needs and rights.” Based on this, the great majority of adolescents fall under the age-based definition of “child”, a person under the age of 18 years, as adopted by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

Key facts on adolescents and teenage pregnancies

Approximately 12 million girls aged 15-19 years and at least 777,000 girls under 15 years give birth each year in developing regions.

As of 31 January 2020, the following are key facts presented by WHO:

- At least 10 million unintended pregnancies occur each year among adolescent girls aged 15-19 years in developing countries.
- Complications during pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death for 15 to 9-year-old girls globally.
- An estimation of 5.6 million abortions occur each year among adolescent girls aged 15-19 years; out of which only 3.9 million are safe.

- Pregnancies among adolescent girls contribute to maternal mortality, morbidity and lasting health problems.

Teenage pregnancies in Malaysia

Research has shown that around 14 in every 1,000 underage girls in Malaysia get pregnant every year, adding up to an average of 18,000 teenage girls per year.

Why do teenage pregnancies happen?

The period between childhood and adulthood is growing larger and more distinct with the early onset of puberty. Adolescents are at the second decade of their lives and experiencing enormous physical, psychological and social changes. Many young people become sexually active before the age of 15 and 42% live in poverty; making them vulnerable to becoming pregnant at an early age. The following are risk factors that contribute to adolescent pregnancies and births.

Early onset of sexual activity

Early sexual activity is a growing issue in adolescent development. Early onset of puberty and peer pressure to engage in adult-like activities can encourage adolescents to engage in various levels of sexual experimentation. Some of the risks for early sexual experimentation is sexual abuse, drug and

alcohol use and unplanned/unwanted pregnancies. A significant risk factor for early sexual experimentation is a history of sexual trauma.

Child marriages

In many communities, particularly least developed communities, girls are under pressure to marry and bear children early. Poverty and gender inequality are a few main factors of child marriages all around the world, including Malaysia. In such situations, girls choose to become pregnant due to their limited education and employment prospects. There may also be knowledge gaps and misconceptions on contraceptive methods or lack of access to such services. Due to their age, there may exist a lack of autonomy to ensure correct and consistent use of contraceptive methods or the power of negotiation regarding safe sex and childbearing. This is saddening particularly since the child wife is now subject to all sorts of health risks, including teenage pregnancy.

Sexual violence

An additional cause of unintended pregnancy is sexual violence, with more than a third of girls in some countries reporting that their first sexual encounter was coerced. Worldwide, around 15 million adolescent girls aged 15-19 have experienced forced sex in their lifetime. The Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development reported a total of 50,568 cases of rape, incest, molestation, sexual harassment and domestic violence between 2013 and May 2018. The report revealed that the victims were mostly women and children. Approximately 7,309 rape cases, 1200 incest cases and 3,478 molest cases involved victims below 18 years. In many cases, the abuse is discovered when the girl becomes pregnant.

Statutory rape in Malaysia

Malaysia's Penal code defines statutory rape as sexual activity with a girl under the age of 16.

Consequences of teenage pregnancies

Consequences of teenage pregnancies are rarely discussed. With the rise in teen pregnancy cases, particularly in the country, it is very important for parents to speak to their adolescent kids about this subject matter. The following are some of the consequences that may occur:

Medical and health risks

Teens are at higher risk for preeclampsia and its complications than average age mothers. This condition can harm their kidneys or even be fatal for mother and baby. Risks for the baby include premature birth and low birth weight. Premature babies tend to be underweight and low birth weight affects brain development.

Limited education and employment prospects

In many situations, a pregnant girl loses her opportunity to continue her education and thereby her chances for better employment. Although both is still attainable, there are added hurdles now to conquer and not many will persevere. Dropping out of school limits the chances of employment prospects and changes the future which the girl and her loved ones may have set in place for her.

Effects on teen fathers

Although the consequences of teenage pregnancies affect girls more than boys, but we cannot deny the fact that this can be a life changing event for teen fathers who are responsible/held responsible. Teen fathers don't have to worry about health implications, but they

could face similar difficulties staying in school and earning a living.

Effects on babies

Other than the possibility of being born prematurely or underweight, the baby conceived by a teenage girl may be given up for adoption after the child mother is sent to a halfway home to deliver her baby. This is because in most communities, an illegitimate child is believed to bring shame to the family.

Unwed mothers, particularly teenage girls, often hide their pregnancies from their family members and friends. With no support and the rising fear of bringing shame to the family, many girls will end up dumping or abandoning their newborn infants. An average of 100 babies are said to be dumped nationwide in Malaysia every year.

What to do when a teenager finds herself pregnant?

- Go to the nearest doctor or health clinic for antenatal care/checkup. This is important to monitor the wellbeing of the mother and the unborn baby.
- Seek help/consult a trusted adult. This can be a parent, teacher, counselor, doctor/health care provider or a social officer.
- DO NOT put yourself/the unborn baby in danger by keeping your pregnancy a secret.
- Seeking illegal abortion/termination of pregnancy is dangerous.
- Call us at 03-22743489 to seek consultation or referrals.

FReHA's prevention and support programme for teenage pregnancies.

At Freha.

1. We provide comprehensive sexuality education to adolescents and young people on their sexual and reproductive health and rights.
2. We empower young people to make informed choices about their sexual and reproductive health and rights.
3. We provide non-judgmental and confidential services to all our clients, including young people.
4. We provide referrals for services that are required by young people but not provided at our clinics.

How to prevent teenage pregnancies?

Abstain from sex

We don't want to sound old school and naggy but this is a sure way of preventing pregnancy before you are ready to risk is all!

Educate yourself about pregnancy and learn about the myths and facts

There are a lot of myths surrounding the topic of pregnancy and it is good to be correctly informed. One myth buster would be "You CAN get pregnant even after having sex for the first time."

Educate yourself about contraceptives

We don't live in denial. If you are already in a sexual relationship or planning to start one, educate yourself on contraceptives and use them correctly and consistently. It can literally save a life, or even three!

Find other ways of “Self-Love”

Although masturbation and self-love is another taboo topic particularly in our community, it is, however, a better option than a child bringing a child into this world.

Talk to a trusted adult

We all have that adult, or in the case of luckier ones, more than one adult who we can trust and be open with about anything. Talk to them and seek their support. If you're an adult, then try to be the one they can turn to!

Sources:

Bunyan, “50,000 Sex Crimes, Domestic Violence Cases since 2013,” *Malay Mail*, July 23, 2018, accessed October 11, 2018, <https://www.malaymail.com/s/1655182/50000-sex-crimes-domestic-violence-cases-since-2013>

Free Malaysia Today, 3 January 2019, Malaysia's problem with teenage pregnancy

International Planned Parenthood Federation, “Youth,” accessed October 11, 2018, www.ippf.org/our-priorities/youth

<http://www.myhealth.gov.my/en/teenage-pregnancy/>

Shariff, A. A. B. M. (2012). Curbing the problems of baby dumping and infanticide: a Malaysian Legal Perspective. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 2(12), 173-178.

Noordin, N., Zakaria, Z., Sawal, M. Z. H. M., Hussin, Z. H., Ngah, K., & Nordin, J. (2012). The voice of youngsters on baby dumping issues in Malaysia. *International Journal of Trade, Economics and Finance*, 3(1), 66.

(2020). Retrieved 7 October 2020, from <http://www.e-mjm.org/2015/v70n4/teenage-pregnancy.pdf>

The Star, 11 September 2020, The Teen Pregnancy Issue. <https://www.thestar.com.my/opinion/letters/2020/09/11/the-teen-pregnancy-issue>

UNICEF, “Sexual Violence,” November 2017, accessed October 11, 2018, <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/violence/sexual-violence/>

World Health Organization, “Sixty-Forth World Health Assembly: Resolution WHA 64.28: Youth and Health Risks,” accessed October 11, 2018, http://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/wha64-rec1/a64_rec1-en.pdf

WHO, Adolescent pregnancy, 31 January 2020 <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-pregnancy>

WHO. Global and regional estimates on violence against women: Prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence. Geneva: WHO; 2013.

WHO. Global Accelerated Action for the Health of Adolescents (AA-HA!): Guidance to support country implementation. Geneva: WHO; 2017

<https://www.healthline.com/health/adolescent-pregnancy#prenatal-visits>