Adverse Health Consequences for Adolescent Mothers and their Children

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Maternal morbidity and mortality

• First pregnancy at an early age is risky. Although births among adolescents account for only 11% of all births worldwide, they account for 23% of the overall burden of disease (in terms of disability-adjusted life years) due to pregnancy and childbirth among women of all ages\(^1\).

• In low- and middle-income countries, complications of pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death in women aged 15–19 years\(^2\).

• Overwhelming evidence from population-based and hospital-based studies both in developed and developing countries show that adolescent pregnant girls are at increased risk for preterm labour and delivery, compared to older pregnant women. The youngest age groups run the highest risk\(^3\).

• The most conspicuous poor outcomes include not only preterm birth but also obstructed labour, and the prevailing consequences of obstructed labour are vesico-vaginal and recto-vaginal fistulas, which, if not treated adequately, make the woman an outcast.

• Up to 65% (two-thirds) of all women with obstetric fistula developed this because of an adolescent pregnancy, with dire consequences for their lives, physically and socially\(^4\).

• The younger the mother, the greater the risk of obstructed labour, and the greater the risk of obstetric fistula\(^5\).

• Young maternal age also increases the risk of maternal anaemia\(^6\), worsening the consequences of hemorrhage, and higher risks of eclampsia, puerperal endometritis and systemic infections are also found among adolescent mothers (10-19 years) compared with mothers aged 20–24 years\(^7\).

Neonatal and infant health

• In low- and middle-income countries adolescent pregnancy has been related with serious health risks for newborns such as severe neonatal conditions and
early neonatal death, and multiple studies over the past decade have associated young mother’s age and low birth-weight of newborns.

- Infants born to a mother under 18 suffer from a 60 per cent higher risk of dying in the first year of their life compared to infants born to a mother age 19 or older. The younger the age of the mother the higher these risks.

- Adolescent pregnancy has equally been linked to long-term effects on child well-being, including late physical and cognitive development.

All of these risks are higher for the youngest mothers <15 years

- Girls who become pregnant before age 15 in low- and middle-income countries have double the risk of maternal death and obstetric fistula than older women, in particular in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

- Girls under age 15 are five times more likely to die from maternity-related causes than women over age 20.

Finally, the vast majority most of these risks are occurring in a context of child marriage

- Nine of 10 births to girls below age 18 occur within early marriage. Hence, it is child marriage that contributes substantially to these serious health risks for young women and their children.

- Child marriage also derails the live of girls by interruption of their education, limiting their future earnings and opportunities.

- Child brides are also at a higher risk of intimate partner violence than women married as adults. In a study of 34 countries, 29% of women who were married as children had suffered from physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence, compared to 20% of women who were married as adults.

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1 WHO, Early marriages, adolescent and young pregnancies: Report to the World Health Assembly, 2012
2 See footnote 15.
4 See footnote 15.
5 See footnote 8.


9 See footnote 5.
10 See footnote 12.
11 See footnote 5.
12 UNFPA, State of World Population 2013: Motherhood in Childhood — Facing the Challenge of Adolescent Pregnancy. 2013
13 UNFPA, Giving birth should not be a matter of life and death. 2012