

The Nutritional Status of Adolescents in India

The interrelationship between the well-being of a community and its adolescent population is well known—as adolescents thrive, so does the community they are living in. India is home to more than 250 million adolescents of the world's 1.8 billion adolescents, which provides an immense opportunity for future development of the country. As children grow into adolescence, they undergo rapid development, both physically and emotionally/cognitively. This rapid growth is accompanied by a concordant increase in nutrient requirements. Nutritional practices and behaviours that are inculcated during the period of adolescence usually determine an individual's long-term health and can either benefit or adversely impact it. Nutritional deficiencies, suboptimal linear growth, undernutrition, and being overweight are significant public health problems among adolescents, although infectious diseases and injury-related causes constitute the major burden of diseases among them. Given these contexts, the UDAYA survey of adolescents, which was conducted across two waves (2015–16 and 2018–19) in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, sought to assess, among other things, the nutritional status of adolescents.



The main physical traits used as a marker for nutritional status were thinness and being overweight or obese. **Thinness was more common among boys than girls—20–30 percent of boys were thin for their age as compared with 10–20 percent of girls (except older married girls—25%).** The prevalence of thinness was also relatively higher among those in early adolescence compared with adolescents in older age groups. Both boys and girls showed similar trends with regard to being overweight (2–5%) or obesity (less than 1%), where there was an increase in prevalence with age. However, there was a marked increase for married girls—**older married girls were more than twice as likely to be overweight and thrice as likely to be obese as compared with their unmarried counterparts.**



The prevalence of anaemia is another important indicator of nutritional status and is widely recognised as a public health problem in India. **Girls are more than twice as likely as boys to be anaemic (either mild, moderate, or severe), with over six in ten girls suffering from some level of anaemia.** The severity of anaemia also

increases as girls grow older—**more than 20 percent of older girls, both married and unmarried, are moderately or severely anaemic.** In response to this rising burden, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MOHFW), Government of India, launched the weekly iron and folic acid supplementation programme (WIFS) for adolescent school-going girls and boys as well as for girls who were out of school. However, feedback from respondents suggests lacunae in the implementation of the programme—**less than 10 percent of respondents received iron and folic acid (IFA) supplements in the year preceding the interview.** Of those who had received IFA tablets, less than a fifth received four or more tablets in the month preceding the interview—the highest proportion of adolescents who had received IFA supplements were older girls (25%) and married girls (28%). With regard to deworming tablets, younger adolescents reported a higher receipt of tablets compared with their older counterparts.

More than 80 percent of adolescents suffer deficiency of one or more essential micronutrients

The Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey (CNNS), which was completed in 2018, reveals glaring nutritional deficiencies on a nationwide scale. The findings lead to the role of the flagship nutrition programme POSHAN Abhiyaan in guiding future policy in order to curb malnutrition in children and adolescents. Along with the use of current data as baseline indicators, it will be essential to track the progress made under this programme with a more efficient monitoring and evaluation system. Further studies are also required to understand the nexus of nutritional status with other social determinants such as education, gender equality, social security, and food security and how programmes and policies can be developed to address these challenges in order to ensure the sustainability of nutrition programmes as well as the growth and development of adolescents.