

Adolescent Preventive Healthcare Utilization and Barriers to Early Mental Health Support Access

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Abstract

Background: Preventive healthcare and timely mental health support are essential for promoting adolescent well-being and reducing the long-term burden of mental health disorders. However, utilization of preventive health services and early mental health interventions among adolescents remains suboptimal due to various personal, social, and systemic barriers.

Objective: This study aimed to assess the utilization of preventive healthcare services among adolescents and identify key barriers affecting access to early mental health support.

Methodology: A cross-sectional survey was conducted among 250 adolescents aged 13–19 years from educational institutions and community settings. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire assessing healthcare utilization patterns, mental health awareness, and perceived barriers to seeking professional support. Descriptive statistics and association analyses were performed.

Findings: Approximately 64% of participants reported utilizing preventive healthcare services at least once annually, while only 38% sought professional mental health support when experiencing emotional distress. Major barriers included stigma (58%), lack of awareness of available services (52%), concerns about confidentiality (47%), financial constraints (35%), and limited accessibility of mental health resources (33%).

Conclusion: Despite moderate utilization of preventive healthcare services, access to early mental health support among adolescents remains limited. Addressing stigma, improving mental health literacy, ensuring confidentiality, and expanding accessible adolescent-friendly services are critical to enhancing early intervention and promoting positive mental health outcomes.

Keywords: Adolescents, Preventive Healthcare, Mental Health Support, Healthcare Utilization, Barriers to Access, Mental Health Literacy, Early Intervention, Adolescent Health.

1 Introduction

Adolescence is a critical developmental stage characterized by significant physical, psychological, emotional, and social changes. During this period, preventive healthcare services play a vital role in promoting healthy behaviors, preventing disease, and supporting mental well-being. Preventive healthcare encompasses routine health check-ups, immunizations, health education, counseling, and early identification of physical and mental health concerns [1]. Despite the recognized importance of preventive healthcare, many adolescents underutilize available health services, particularly mental health support systems [2].

Mental health disorders account for a substantial proportion of the global disease burden among adolescents. According to recent estimates, approximately one in seven adolescents experiences a mental health condition, with anxiety, depression, and behavioral disorders being among the most prevalent concerns [3]. Early intervention is crucial because most mental health disorders emerge before adulthood and can significantly affect educational attainment, social relationships, and long-term quality of life [4]. However, adolescents frequently encounter challenges in accessing timely and appropriate mental healthcare services.

Several studies have identified barriers that hinder adolescents from seeking preventive healthcare and mental health support. These barriers include social stigma associated with mental illness, lack of mental health literacy, concerns regarding confidentiality, inadequate parental support, financial limitations, and insufficient availability of youth-friendly healthcare services [5,6]. Furthermore, cultural beliefs and misconceptions about mental health often discourage adolescents from discussing psychological distress or seeking professional assistance [7].

Healthcare accessibility remains another significant determinant of service utilization. Geographic disparities, shortage of mental health professionals, and limited integration of mental health services into primary healthcare settings contribute to unmet healthcare needs among adolescents [8]. Digital technologies and school-based health programs have emerged as potential strategies to improve access to preventive and mental health services; however, their effectiveness varies across populations and healthcare systems [9].

Recent evidence highlights that improving awareness and reducing stigma can substantially increase adolescents' willingness to seek help for mental health concerns [10]. Additionally, supportive family environments, peer encouragement, and adolescent-centered healthcare policies have been associated with better healthcare utilization outcomes [11]. Understanding the factors influencing preventive healthcare utilization and mental health support access is therefore essential for designing effective interventions and policies that address the unique needs of adolescents [12].

1.1 Research Gap

Although previous studies have examined adolescent healthcare utilization and mental health service access separately, limited research has explored the combined relationship between preventive healthcare utilization and barriers to early mental health support access among adolescents. Furthermore, there is insufficient evidence regarding how stigma, awareness, confidentiality concerns, and service accessibility collectively influence help-seeking behaviors in diverse adolescent populations.

1.2 Objectives

1. To assess the utilization of preventive healthcare services among adolescents.
2. To identify and analyze the barriers affecting early access to mental health support among adolescents.

2 Literature review

2.1 Preventive Healthcare Utilization among Adolescents

Preventive healthcare services are essential for promoting healthy growth and preventing future health complications among adolescents. Recent studies indicate that regular health screenings, vaccinations, and health counseling contribute significantly to improved physical and psychological outcomes. However, healthcare utilization among adolescents remains inconsistent due to variations in awareness, accessibility, and socioeconomic conditions [13]. Research has shown that adolescents with greater health literacy are more likely to engage in preventive healthcare behaviors and seek professional assistance when needed [14].

2.2 Barriers to Early Mental Health Support Access

Mental health challenges among adolescents have increased considerably in recent years. Despite growing awareness, access to early mental health support remains limited. Major barriers include stigma, fear of judgment, confidentiality concerns, inadequate mental health knowledge, and shortages of specialized mental health professionals [15]. Digital inequalities and financial constraints further reduce service accessibility, particularly in underserved communities [16].

2.3 Role of Family and School-Based Support

Family support and school-based mental health programs play a crucial role in facilitating early intervention. Studies suggest that adolescents receiving emotional support from parents, teachers, and peers demonstrate greater willingness to seek

professional mental health services [17]. Furthermore, integrated school-health programs have been associated with increased mental health awareness and reduced stigma among adolescents [18].



Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Adolescent Healthcare Utilization

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between preventive healthcare utilization and access to early mental health support among adolescents. The framework highlights how individual factors (health literacy and awareness), social factors (family and peer support), and systemic factors (service accessibility and affordability) influence healthcare-seeking behavior. Stigma and confidentiality concerns act as mediating barriers that reduce service utilization, ultimately affecting adolescents' mental health outcomes and overall well-being.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional research design to examine adolescent preventive healthcare utilization and barriers to early mental health support access. The cross-sectional approach was selected because it enables the collection of data from a large population at a single point in time, providing insights into healthcare utilization patterns and perceived barriers among adolescents [19].

3.2 Study Population and Sample

The target population consisted of adolescents aged **13–19 years** enrolled in secondary schools and community youth centers. A total of 250 adolescents participated in the study. Participants were selected using a **simple** random sampling technique to ensure equal opportunity for inclusion and minimize selection bias. The sample size was considered adequate for descriptive and inferential statistical analyses.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 250)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	120	48.0
	Female	130	52.0
Age Group	13–15 years	95	38.0
	16–17 years	90	36.0
	18–19 years	65	26.0
Residence	Urban	145	58.0
	Rural	105	42.0

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the participants. Female adolescents represented a slightly higher proportion (52%) than males (48%). The majority of respondents belonged to the 13–15 years age group, followed by the 16–17 years

category. Urban residents constituted 58% of the sample, while 42% were from rural areas. These characteristics provide a balanced representation of adolescents from diverse demographic backgrounds.

3.3 Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire comprising four sections: demographic information, preventive healthcare utilization, mental health awareness, and perceived barriers to mental health support access. The questionnaire was adapted from previous adolescent health studies and reviewed by healthcare experts to ensure content validity [20].

3.4 Data Analysis

Collected data were coded and analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize participant responses. Inferential analyses were conducted to determine associations between healthcare utilization and perceived barriers.



Figure 2. Research Methodology Framework

Figure 2 illustrates the methodological framework used in the study. The process began with identifying the adolescent population and selecting participants through simple random sampling. Structured questionnaires were then distributed to collect information on healthcare utilization and mental health support barriers. The collected data underwent statistical analysis using SPSS software. Finally, the findings were interpreted to identify key trends, relationships, and factors affecting adolescent healthcare-seeking behaviors.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review committee. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from participants and guardians where necessary. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study, and respondents were assured that their information would be used solely for research purposes [21].

4 Results & Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study on adolescent preventive healthcare utilization and barriers to early mental health support access. Data collected from 250 adolescents were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The results provide insights into healthcare utilization patterns, mental health support-seeking behaviors, and perceived barriers affecting access to services. Tables and figures are used to summarize the findings, while accompanying explanations highlight key trends and relationships observed among the study participants.

Table 2. Preventive Healthcare Utilization Among Adolescents (N = 250)

Utilization Frequency	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Regularly (Annual Check-up)	160	64.0
Occasionally	60	24.0
Rarely	20	8.0
Never	10	4.0

The findings indicate that 64% of adolescents regularly utilized preventive healthcare services through annual health check-ups. Approximately 24% reported occasional utilization, while 8% rarely accessed preventive services. Only 4% had never utilized preventive healthcare. These findings suggest a moderate level of awareness and engagement with preventive healthcare services among adolescents. However, the presence of irregular users highlights the need for increased health education and accessibility initiatives.

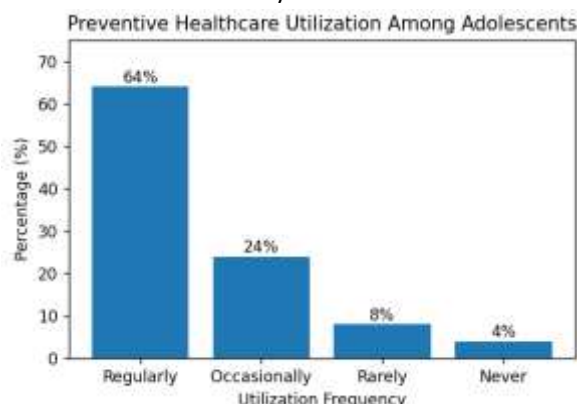


Figure 3. Preventive Healthcare Utilization

Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of preventive healthcare utilization among adolescents. The majority of respondents reported regular utilization of preventive services, demonstrating positive healthcare-seeking behavior. However, a notable proportion of adolescents accessed services only occasionally or rarely. These findings suggest that while preventive healthcare awareness exists, barriers such as limited accessibility, lack of time, and insufficient awareness may still prevent consistent healthcare utilization among some adolescents.

Table 3. Barriers to Early Mental Health Support Access

Barrier	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Stigma	145	58.0
Lack of Awareness	130	52.0
Confidentiality Concerns	118	47.2
Financial Constraints	88	35.2
Limited Service Availability	82	32.8

Table 3 reveals that stigma was the most frequently reported barrier to accessing mental health support (58%). Lack of awareness regarding available mental health services affected 52% of participants, while confidentiality concerns influenced 47.2%. Financial constraints and limited service availability were also significant barriers. These findings indicate that psychological and informational barriers have a greater impact on help-seeking behavior than structural barriers among adolescents.

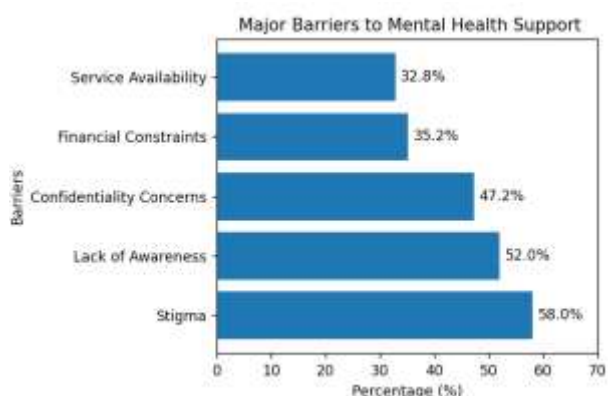


Figure 4. Major Barriers to Mental Health Support

Figure 4 demonstrates that stigma remains the dominant obstacle preventing adolescents from seeking mental health support. Fear of social judgment and discrimination often discourages help-seeking behaviors. Additionally, insufficient awareness of available services and concerns regarding privacy contribute significantly to delayed intervention. Addressing these barriers through mental health education, awareness campaigns, and confidential adolescent-friendly services may improve early mental health support utilization.

The study findings indicate that preventive healthcare utilization among adolescents is relatively high, with nearly two-thirds of participants attending regular health check-ups. However, access to early mental health support remains hindered by stigma, lack of awareness, and confidentiality concerns. These results emphasize the importance of developing adolescent-centered healthcare policies, strengthening mental health literacy programs, and enhancing service accessibility to promote early intervention and improve adolescent well-being.

Discussion

The findings indicate that preventive healthcare utilization among adolescents is relatively encouraging, with 64% of participants reporting regular annual health check-ups. This suggests a growing awareness of preventive health practices among young people. However, access to early mental health support remains a significant challenge. Stigma emerged as the most prominent barrier, followed by lack of awareness and confidentiality concerns. These findings are consistent with previous research highlighting psychological and social obstacles to mental health help-seeking. The results emphasize the need for comprehensive mental health education, adolescent-friendly healthcare services, and awareness programs that promote early intervention and reduce negative perceptions associated with mental health support.

5 Conclusion

This study examined adolescent preventive healthcare utilization and barriers to early mental health support access. The results revealed moderate to high utilization of preventive healthcare services, indicating that many adolescents recognize the importance of routine health maintenance. Nevertheless, several barriers continue to limit access to mental health services, particularly stigma, insufficient awareness, confidentiality concerns, financial limitations, and restricted service availability. These barriers may delay help-seeking behavior and increase the risk of untreated mental health conditions among adolescents. Therefore, healthcare providers, educational institutions, families, and policymakers should collaborate to strengthen mental health literacy, improve service accessibility, ensure confidentiality, and create supportive environments for adolescents. Addressing these challenges will facilitate early intervention, enhance healthcare utilization, and contribute to improved mental health outcomes and overall adolescent well-being.

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