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## Focus on mental health for teens to improve physical health, combat obesity, U.S. study urges

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*High school students who participated in a new mental health school program, compared to the standard high school health class, showed better results...*

High school students who participated in a new mental health school program, compared to the standard high school health class, showed better results in lowering obesity, improving grades, alleviating severe depression, and reducing substance use, a new U.S. study suggests.

A total of 779 high school students age 14 to 16 in the southwestern states participated in the study. Half attended a class that covered standard health topics such as road safety, dental care, and immunizations. The others attended a program called COPE (Creating Opportunities for Personal Empowerment): Healthy Lifestyles TEEN (which stands for thinking, emotions, exercise, nutrition).

### **High school years hard on adolescent health, with spikes in drinking, smoking and drug use: Canada study<sup>1</sup>**

High school may improve young people's minds, but it does the opposite for their bodies.

A new study out of the University of Waterloo shows Canadian students in Grade 12 are in worse health than their younger high school peers.

The research, published in the latest issue of the journal BMC Public Health, found that by the time students reach senior year, they're at a significantly increased risk for chronic diseases such as diabetes and lung cancer.

It shows that over the four years of high school, the number of smokers went up 170%, binge drinking jumped 167% and marijuana use rose by 124%.

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The study is published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*<sup>3</sup>, and the lead author of this study is Bernadette Melnyk, creator of the COPE program and dean of The Ohio State University College of Nursing.

Melnyk began developing COPE more than 20 years ago while she was a nurse practitioner at a psychiatric unit for children and adolescents.

The COPE program has a weekly 50-minute session that combines behavioral skills session, nutrition information,

and physical activity over the course of 15 weeks.

These lessons are spelled out for instructors in manuals and PowerPoints. This study was the first of its kind to test COPE's effectiveness when taught by teachers in a health classroom setting. In pilot studies, Melnyk and her team taught the curriculum themselves.

The COPE program emphasizes the link between thinking patterns, emotions, and behaviour. Behavioural skill building included exploring events that trigger negative thoughts, negative beliefs teens may have about themselves based on the triggering event, and the consequences of feeling bad and engaging in negative behavior as a result.

"Schools are great at teaching math and social studies, but we aren't giving teens the life skills they need to successfully deal with stress, how to problem-solve, how to set goals, and those are key elements in this healthy lifestyle intervention," Melnyk said.

COPE's nutrition lessons focused on topics such as portion sizes, social eating, and 20 minutes of movement.

More than half of the students began at a healthy weight, 19% were considered overweight, and 23.4% in the obese category for their age. Almost 10% of the teens reported having anxiety and depression symptoms.

Immediately after the programs ended, the results of the COPE students exceeded the group who has the standard health class in several areas: 4,061 more steps per day; a significantly lower average body mass index (BMI); better scores in cooperation, assertion and academic competence; and lower alcohol use - 12.96% of COPE teens compared to 19.94% of adolescents in the other class.

Symptoms in teens who were severely depressed also dropped to normal levels at the end of the COPE lessons compared to the other group, whose symptoms remained elevated.

The BMI improvements in COPE teens held for six months, and a trend toward lower alcohol use among COPE teens was maintained. Two school systems and a YMCA chapter in Ohio have already adopted the COPE program.

According to a Statistics Canada survey conducted in 2009 to 2011 using World Health Organization standards of measurement, close to one third of 5- to 17-year-olds, were classified as overweight (19.8%) or obese (11.7%). Of the estimated 1.6 million overweight or obese children, the prevalence was higher among boys at 12.1%, over girls at 8%.

## References

1. [life.nationalpost.com/2013/06/20/high-school-years-hard-on-adolescent-health-with-spikes-in-drinking-smoking-and-drug-use-canada-study](http://life.nationalpost.com/2013/06/20/high-school-years-hard-on-adolescent-health-with-spikes-in-drinking-smoking-and-drug-use-canada-study)
2. [life.nationalpost.com/2013/06/20/high-school-years-hard-on-adolescent-health-with-spikes-in-drinking-smoking-and-drug-use-canada-study](http://life.nationalpost.com/2013/06/20/high-school-years-hard-on-adolescent-health-with-spikes-in-drinking-smoking-and-drug-use-canada-study)
3. [www.ajpmonline.org](http://www.ajpmonline.org)

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