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An integrative review of the nurse's role in health education for the prevention of syphilis in adolescence

Uma revisão integrativa sobre o papel do enfermeiro na educação em saúde para a prevenção da sífilis na adolescência

Una revisión integrativa sobre el papel del enfermero en la educación para la salud para la prevención de la sífilis en la adolescencia

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Abstract:
Introduction: Scientific literature indicates that many adolescents still possess insufficient knowledge regarding STIs, methods of prevention, and the use of condoms. Furthermore, adolescents (individuals aged 10 to 19) remain among the groups most vulnerable to STIs. It is recommended that the provision of testing, sexual health history taking, and—most importantly—comprehensive sex education be normalized as strategies to reduce stigma and expand access to care. Objectives: To analyze the strategies employed by nursing professionals for the prevention of syphilis among adolescents. Method: This study is an integrative literature review, conducted as descriptive research with a qualitative approach. Results: Planning initiatives aimed at raising awareness about syphilis among adolescents may include sex education, guidance, and clear information regarding unprotected sexual activity and its potential consequences, as well as increasing the availability of rapid tests, which are crucial for the early diagnosis of syphilis. Conclusion: This study enabled an analysis of the strategies used by nursing professionals to prevent syphilis among adolescents. The role of the nurse is of critical importance in developing educational, clinical, and preventive interventions tailored to this target population.

Keywords: Syphilis. Sexually Transmitted Infections. Adolescents. Nursing Care.

Resumo:
Introdução: A literatura científica indica que diversos adolescentes ainda apresentam conhecimento insuficiente sobre ISTs, modos de prevenção e preservativos. Ademais, adolescentes (indivíduos na faixa etária entre 10 e 19 anos) permanecem entre os grupos com maior vulnerabilidade às IST, sendo recomendada a normalização da oferta de testagem, anamnese sexual e principalmente a educação sexual de forma abrangente como estratégias para reduzir estigmatizações e ampliar acesso ao objetivo do cuidar. Objetivos: Analisar as estratégias utilizadas pelos profissionais de Enfermagem para a prevenção da sífilis entre adolescentes. Método: O presente estudo é uma revisão integrativa da literatura, sendo uma pesquisa descritiva com abordagem qualitativa. Resultados: O planejamento de ações voltadas a conscientização da sífilis entre os adolescentes pode envolver educação sexual, orientações e informações assertivas sobre relações sexuais desprotegidas e possíveis consequências, aumento da oferta de testes rápidos e sua relevância no diagnóstico precoce da sífilis. Conclusão: O presente estudo permitiu a realização da análise de estratégias empregadas por profissionais de Enfermagem para a prevenção da sífilis entre adolescentes. A atuação do enfermeiro é de extrema relevância na elaboração de ações educativas, assistenciais e preventivas de acordo com o público-alvo.

Palavras-chave: Sífilis. Infecções Sexualmente Transmissíveis. Adolescentes. Cuidados de Enfermagem.

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Resumen:
Introducción: La literatura científica indica que muchos adolescentes aún presentan conocimientos insuficientes sobre las ITS, los métodos de prevención y los preservativos. Asimismo, los adolescentes (personas de entre 10 y 19 años) siguen estando entre los grupos más vulnerables a las ITS. Se recomienda normalizar la oferta de pruebas, la anamnesis sexual y, principalmente, la educación sexual integral como estrategias para reducir la estigmatización y ampliar el acceso a la atención. Objetivos: Analizar las estrategias utilizadas por los profesionales de enfermería para prevenir la sífilis entre los adolescentes. Método: El presente estudio es una revisión integrativa de la literatura y constituye una investigación descriptiva con enfoque cualitativo. Resultados: La planificación de acciones para concienciar a los adolescentes sobre la sífilis puede incluir educación sexual, orientación e información clara sobre las relaciones sexuales sin protección y sus posibles consecuencias, así como el aumento de la oferta de pruebas rápidas y su relevancia para el diagnóstico precoz de la sífilis. Conclusión: El presente estudio permitió analizar las estrategias empleadas por los profesionales de enfermería para prevenir la sífilis entre los adolescentes. La actuación del enfermero es sumamente relevante para elaborar acciones educativas, asistenciales y preventivas según el público destinatario.

Palabras clave: Sífilis. Infecciones de Transmisión Sexual. Adolescentes. Cuidados de Enfermería.

1 Introduction

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by the bacterium Treponema pallidum, an exclusively human bacterium transmitted through sexual contact and vertically; however, in less frequent cases, it can be transmitted through occupational accidents or blood transfusions. It can present different clinical stages, as well as asymptomatic manifestations and a latent period, highlighting the importance of testing for early identification of the disease [1].

Syphilis is classified as primary, secondary, latent, and tertiary, and, depending on the duration of infection in the body, it is considered early or late. Inadequate treatment or its absence can cause serious problems for the individual, such as neurosyphilis, which may develop at any stage of the disease [2].

Syphilis remains a significant public health problem and challenge in Brazil, particularly among young people and men. Sociodemographic studies have shown that most cases occur in men (62.15%), with a higher prevalence among people of mixed race (43.17%) and those with lower educational attainment. These data clarify the influence of social determinants on the spread of syphilis, showing that educational barriers and difficulties accessing information directly affect adherence to preventive measures, such as seeking an early diagnosis, appropriate treatment, and condom use [3].

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Furthermore, an increasing prevalence of syphilis among individuals still in adolescence has been highlighted. The Ministry of Health [4], in agreement with the World Health Organization (WHO), defines adolescence as the period from 10 to 19 years of age. Adolescence is a stage of the life cycle during which numerous significant biopsychosocial changes occur. Adolescents express their sexuality through different desires, seeking and longing for new ways of existing and allowing themselves to have new experiences. In this respect, adolescents' attitudes and behaviors are undergoing formation and consolidation, making this population group vulnerable [5].

Scientific literature indicates that many adolescents still have insufficient knowledge about STIs, prevention methods, and condoms. Furthermore, adolescents (individuals aged 10 to 19) and young adults (aged 20 to 29) remain among the groups most vulnerable to STIs. Normalizing the provision of testing, sexual history taking, and especially comprehensive sexuality education is recommended as a strategy to reduce stigmatization and expand access to care [6].

One study explored healthcare professionals' perceptions of adolescents' health needs in PHC (primary health care). The research highlighted significant observations by professionals, emphasizing the relevance of welcoming care, the importance of improving PHC as adolescents' gateway to services, and the need for greater resources to develop actions and strategies to reach this age group. The professionals identified reasons why adolescents do not seek health services, including fear, insecurity, embarrassment, limited knowledge, or even believing that they do not need care and holding a mistaken view of “health” [7].

Thus, health education should not be understood merely as the provision of information. Its function is to develop critical understanding, correct misinformation, and encompass negotiation skills and, particularly, protection. By supporting the recognition of signs and risks and strengthening the ability to seek health services, it highlights the enormous relevance of nursing in this context, ensuring awareness and, above all, incorporating individuality and subjectivity into care and consultations through accessible and clear language [8].

The SUS (Brazilian Unified Health System) can have positive impacts on health. In this way, the SUS has enabled a gateway to health services, also known as PHC. In addition, the democratization of health has made it possible to identify health factors, promote health, provide welcoming care, develop territorial actions and strategies, and encourage harm reduction [9].

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1.1 The problem

What strategies do nursing professionals use to prevent syphilis in adolescence?

2 Objectives

2.1 General objective

To analyze the strategies used by nursing professionals to prevent syphilis among adolescents.

2.2 Specific objectives

- To identify strategies that reduce syphilis transmission among adolescents aged 10 to 19 years.
- To understand nurses' role in developing actions to prevent syphilis among adolescents.

3 Rationale

Syphilis is currently considered a public health problem, particularly because its incidence leads to complications among groups with greater exposure and vulnerability. Adolescence involves significant changes in an individual's psychological and social circumstances, and the search for new perspectives can lead to greater susceptibility, such as inadequate use of prevention methods and a lack of information about them. Thus, nursing professionals, together with the Brazilian Unified Health System (SUS) and health education initiatives, have a duty to develop strategies and actions that ensure information reaches adolescents, prioritizing the quality of their sexual lives.

It is therefore essential to understand nursing professionals' role in preventing syphilis during adolescence, considering actions and strategies designed to enhance young people's prior knowledge of this infection and encourage safer sexual practices. This work may contribute positively to scientific literature by strengthening nursing actions to improve care and active outreach to adolescents, with a view to providing comprehensive and informative care regarding syphilis.

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4 Theoretical framework

Adolescence is a stage characterized by significant changes in self-perception and social and family relationships. Perceptions are transformed by a search for identity. However, this age group is classified as being at risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), owing to limited understanding and dialogue about sexuality, limited information about prevention methods, and risky sexual behaviors. At times, fear of criticism, discrimination, and prejudice prevents adolescents from seeking professional help to address subjective issues concerning sexuality [10].

Sexuality in adolescence is a biopsychosociocultural phenomenon; in other words, sexuality is not limited to sex itself. Above all, sexuality involves discovery, thoughts, everyday life, relationships, and sexual orientation. Understanding these aspects is extremely important for preventing STIs such as syphilis, as it enables a better approach directed toward this population. Syphilis prevention involves issues that extend beyond the sexual act alone; its main goals are awareness and autonomy [11].

Syphilis is a public health problem whose reported cases have been increasing significantly in Brazil. Among young people, particularly adolescents, seeking new experiences can lead to serious exposure problems, such as alcohol and other drug use and multiple sexual partners associated with incorrect condom use. Furthermore, knowledge and attitudes do not always go hand in hand: even when previously informed, individuals may continue to engage in behaviors that put them at risk of syphilis [12].

> The serious health consequences of STIs can occur years after infection, further impairing young people's ability to connect cause and effect. Nurses committed to the challenges of caring for young people to prevent STIs can help by providing confidential care and promoting sexual health. Young people at risk need more support in prevention. Nurses are the main agents for addressing this challenge in their roles as providers, counselors, and sexuality educators in individual health encounters and prevention programs in schools and community centers, Family Health Programs (PSFs), and other fields of professional practice [13].

Sexuality education is an important strategy for preventing STIs such as syphilis. Educational actions must consider adolescents' realities, using clear and accessible language that facilitates their understanding. Nursing professionals act as educators, and it is extremely important that they bring these actions to the target population, namely, into schools. Furthermore, nursing actions include lectures, consultations, spaces for dialogue, and

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educational groups, making it possible to identify key needs in a comprehensive and individualized manner [14].

5 Methodology

This study is an integrative literature review, consisting of descriptive research with a qualitative approach. The method is based on data analysis and discussion of what was proposed in the research problem; it also provides an in-depth description of the results, offering a plausible examination of the study's investigation itself [15].

The studies will be selected for the period from 2016 to 2026 through online access to the Virtual Health Library (VHL, or BVS) and PubMed databases. The data search will involve cross-referencing descriptors together with Boolean operators in the respective databases.

The following stages will be followed in designing this study:

1) formulation of the review question;
2) search for and selection of primary studies;
3) extraction of study data;
4) critical appraisal of the primary studies included in the review;
5) synthesis of review results;
6) presentation of the method.

The question guiding this research was based on the PICo strategy (Population/Interest/Context), which underpins the formulation of review questions, enabling effective literature searches and the development of a stronger body of evidence [16].

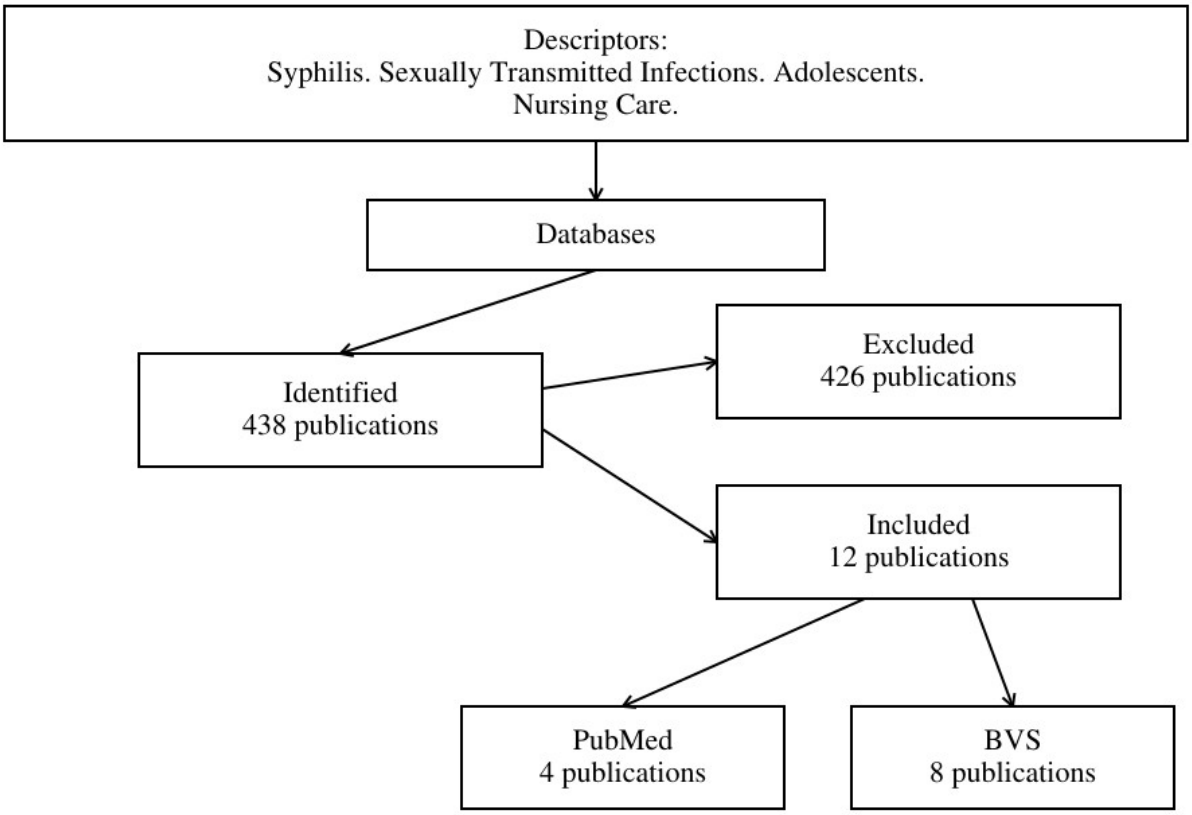
The eligibility criteria for articles to be included in the review sample will be: articles published in English and Portuguese that address the guiding question, with their respective abstracts available in the previously mentioned databases, and publications from 2016 to 2026. Exclusion criteria will be: titles, duplicates, experience reports, dissertations, theses, news items, reports, editorials, gray literature, and works unrelated to the topic.

The search conducted to develop the results yielded 438 results, of which 67 articles were selected from PubMed and 51 from the VHL, totaling 118 articles. After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria through reading, 106 articles did not meet the aforementioned criteria and were excluded from the research. Thus, the sample for this study consisted of 12 articles. Figure 1 presents a flowchart with the article search data to provide a clearer view of the strategy used.

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Figure 1 – Flowchart of the search strategy.



6 Results

Table 1 presents the articles selected after rigorous application of the criteria described, classified according to article title, journal, method, objectives, and year of publication.

Table 1 – Articles selected for the analytical composition of the research

Article title	Journal	Method	Objectives	Year
Health promotion actions in the School Health Program in Ceará: nursing contributions	Revista Brasileira de Enfermagem (REBEn)	Cross-sectional study	To analyze health promotion actions in the school environment and nursing contributions to educational and preventive practices.	2021
Epidemiological analysis of acquired syphilis cases in young people aged 15 to 19 in Brazil (2012–2021)	Revista de Enfermagem UFPE on line	Ecological, descriptive, and quantitative study	To analyze the epidemiological aspects of acquired syphilis cases in young people aged 15 to 19 in Brazil, considering the temporal and geographical distribution of notifications.	2024
Characterization of adolescents' sexual practices	Rev. Latino-Am. Enfermagem	Descriptive observational study	To characterize adolescents' sexual practices and their association with sociodemographic variables, sources of information, and behavioral habits.	2022

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Article title	Journal	Method	Objectives	Year
Clinical and epidemiological situation of diagnosed acquired syphilis cases among adolescents in the state of Amazonas	Revista Foco	Descriptive epidemiological study	To characterize the clinical and epidemiological situation of acquired syphilis among adolescents in the state of Amazonas.	2024
Physicians' and nurses' conceptions of health education about sexually transmitted infections in adolescence	Revista Gaúcha de Enfermagem	Descriptive study with a qualitative approach	To describe family and community physicians' and nurses' conceptions of health education about sexually transmitted infections in adolescence.	2025
Social determinants of health and vulnerability to sexually transmitted infections among adolescents	Revista Brasileira de Enfermagem (REBEn)	Cross-sectional study	To examine the association between social determinants of health and adolescents' vulnerability to sexually transmitted infections (STIs).	2019
Clinical Protocol and Therapeutic Guidelines for Comprehensive Care of People with Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)	Ministry of Health	Clinical and therapeutic protocol	To establish criteria for diagnosing infections, diseases, or health conditions; recommended treatment with medicines and other appropriate products; recommended dosages; and clinical monitoring mechanisms.	2021
Epidemiological profile of acquired syphilis in children and adolescents in Brazil: a nationwide observational study	Fronteira	Descriptive ecological study	This study aims to analyze and compare temporal trends and the epidemiological profile of acquired syphilis in the Brazilian population aged 0 to 19, from 2015 to 2023.	2026
Prevalence and factors associated with risky sexual behavior among Brazilian school adolescents	Ciência e Saúde Coletiva	Cross-sectional study	This study aimed to characterize risky sexual behavior among school adolescents in Brazil and identify associated factors.	2023
Promotion of sexual and reproductive health among adolescents and young adults: equity analysis, Brazil, 2016–2025	Revista do SUS	Literature review	To identify sexual and reproductive health interventions aimed at promoting behavioral changes and developing life skills among adolescents and young adults, considering equity criteria.	2026
Protecting and caring for adolescent health in primary care	Ministry of Health	Clinical and therapeutic protocol	To reduce major diseases and health conditions, improve health surveillance, and contribute to the quality of life of the millions of Brazilian citizens aged 10 to 19.	2018
Temporal trend of syphilis among adolescents in the state of Santa Catarina from 2020 to 2024	Revista Contemporânea	Observational epidemiological study	To analyze syphilis incidence rates among adolescents in Santa Catarina's macroregions, identifying temporal variations and differences by sex.	2025

Source: Authors, 2026.

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7 Discussion

Integration between schools and primary health care is part of the School Health Program (PSE), which aims to develop health promotion actions. In this setting, nursing professionals play a highly relevant role in designing and implementing educational and preventive strategies directed toward adolescents. They can use the school environment as a space for awareness raising, addressing sexuality education, the risks of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), prevention methods, and self-care [17].

A study analyzed the epidemiological situation of acquired syphilis among Brazilian adolescents aged 15 to 19 between 2012 and 2021. The data survey revealed 87,255 reported cases, emphasizing that adolescents constitute a vulnerable population requiring greater attention. Thus, nursing professionals must observe and understand their respective territories to expand their reach to this population, offering rapid testing, providing individual follow-up, strengthening active outreach, and implementing preventive actions and nursing care [18].

Furthermore, a study conducted in Amazonas examined the incidence of acquired syphilis among adolescents. The results indicated that the highest prevalence of cases was concentrated in the 15-to-19-year age group. The authors also point out that educational attainment and socioeconomic issues must be considered so that nursing professionals can have direct access to this population [20]. The incidence of syphilis among adolescents in Santa Catarina's macroregions also highlights the relevance of nurses' knowledge of their territories in providing strategies for early case identification and syphilis prevention campaigns among adolescents [19].

In addition, behaviors such as alcohol, cigarette, and other drug use may be associated with unprotected sexual practices. Nursing professionals must have prior knowledge of the approaches to be used with adolescents and clearly explain professional confidentiality, establishing a bond between professional and patient [21].

Health education is a fundamental strategy in primary care because it promotes critical and reflective thinking, supports a better quality of life, and provides autonomy to those it targets. Through health education, the nursing team opens pathways for dialogue. Thus, approaches that welcome adolescents should be developed to promote understanding of syphilis prevention, its clinical manifestations, diagnosis, and respective treatment [22].

Social determinants of health reveal adolescents' vulnerability to STIs. A study included 287 participants aged 11 to 17, and the results showed that 73.9% of adolescents were more

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vulnerable to STIs [23]. Accordingly, welcoming care and the approach used with adolescents must be individualized rather than generalized, considering each person's lived experiences and reality. Furthermore, sociodemographic, social, behavioral, and mental health factors shape how adolescents practice self-care in relation to risky sexual behaviors [24].

Regarding adolescent care, nurses play a crucial role in welcoming this population, providing humanized care and standardizing practices to strengthen syphilis prevention actions among adolescents. Professionals must closely monitor adolescents in vulnerable situations, identifying potential risks that may compromise individuals' biopsychosocial well-being [25].

Planning actions to raise syphilis awareness among adolescents may include sexuality education, guidance and clear information about unprotected sexual intercourse and its possible consequences, increasing access to rapid tests and explaining their relevance to early syphilis diagnosis, and providing condoms and instruction on their correct use [26]. Nurses must develop opportunities for and encourage adolescents to gain greater autonomy over their own care, recognize potential risks to which they are exposed, adopt protective measures, and seek professional care when necessary [27].

At times, adolescents do not seek health services because they fear judgment and do not understand professional confidentiality. Professionals must be prepared to create a welcoming environment and emphasize that patients' experiences will not be judged. Qualified listening is therefore appropriate to promote adolescent health [4].

8 Conclusion

This study enabled an analysis of strategies used by nursing professionals to prevent syphilis among adolescents. Nurses' work is extremely relevant to developing educational, care-related, and preventive actions tailored to the target population. According to the results, adolescence is a period of greater vulnerability, mainly owing to social and behavioral factors and limited knowledge of preventive methods.

Sexual health education is one of the main strategies for addressing syphilis among adolescents. Professionals should develop discussion circles, individual consultations, lectures, and effective actions in schools, as well as provide rapid testing and follow-up throughout treatment. Reducing adolescents' vulnerabilities related to syphilis is based on implementing humanized welcoming care, active listening, and health education practices that seek to promote autonomy in this population.

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