

## The Health Needs of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children

Unaccompanied children seeking asylum are young people aged under 18 years who have travelled to another country to ask for asylum due to fear of persecution in their home country, and who have become separated from their usual parent or carer. Unaccompanied children are not a homogenous cohort with one narrative but rather, like any group of young people, are children of varying ages and from diverse backgrounds who have had a range of experiences prior to and during their asylum journey. Unaccompanied children may have experienced significant hardship prior to coming to the United Kingdom (UK), including the loss of a parent or carer.

The literature suggests that unaccompanied children have significant physical and mental health needs. These are influenced by access to basic healthcare in their home country, their experience of hardship, including the witnessing and experiencing of traumatic events, and the duration of and conditions experienced on their journey to the UK. The most important physical health issues relate to: - Communicable (infectious) Diseases (e.g., Tuberculosis screening and vaccination) - Dental Health - Nutrition (e.g., anaemia) - Sexual and reproductive health - Women's health.

Unaccompanied children are also at high risk of mental illness. The prevalence of symptoms consistent with a mental illness in unaccompanied children has been reported as up to 48%. The most common mental illnesses reported in unaccompanied children are post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), mood disorders and agoraphobia. It is important to note that unaccompanied children may show delayed presentations of mental illness, necessitating ongoing surveillance and repeat assessment. The literature suggests that social workers play an important role in identifying children with symptoms of mental illness early, owing to their experience in supporting young people and the ongoing contact they have with the young person.

### Most Common Health Problems Experienced by Asylum Seeking Children

- **Physical issues: -**
  - Immunisations not received
  - Possibility of TB
  - Possibility of Blood Borne Viruses
  - Risk of other infectious diseases including parasitic infection
  - Semi starvation- stomach problems/malnutrition/vitamin deficiencies/anaemia
  - Headaches
  - Skin problems- rashes, scabies etc.
  - Lack of dental care
  - Visual / hearing problems
  - Sexual Health issues/Pregnancy
  - Allergies
  - Sexual assault/Physical abuse (prior to seeking asylum and on journey)
  - FGM
- **Emotional/Mental Health issues**

Separation- Loss of family and Trauma leading to: -

  - Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
  - Depression/Anxiety/Mood disorder/Agoraphobia
  - Sleep problems/ Nightmares
  - Possible torture/trafficking/exploitation