

# Talking to Your Teen about Sex

With proper information and advice, teenagers can make responsible choices regarding sex. Adolescents are at high risk for harmful consequences of sexual activity, including sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and unintended pregnancy. Your teen needs accurate information about sex, even if he or she makes the healthy decision to delay or abstain from sexual activity. Teens who are sexually active should use a condom every time they have sex; this reduces the risk of STDs, including human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS). Your doctor can provide information about more effective options for birth control.

## Teens and sex—Why you need to talk

By their early teens, girls and boys are sexually mature. Their bodies are physically capable of having children, and they develop a normal interest in relationships and sex.

Although they are physically mature, adolescent boys and girls are not necessarily mature in other ways. Compared with adults, sexually active teens are at higher risk of problems like unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV and AIDS. (HIV is the virus that causes AIDS, or acquired immunodeficiency syndrome.)

Myths and incorrect beliefs about sex are common among teens. To make responsible choices, your teen needs accurate information about sex, including issues like abstinence and “safe sex” to reduce the risk of STDs as well as information on birth control.

Sex is a highly personal topic that can be difficult for parents and teens to discuss. This chapter is intended as a starting point for you to discuss sexual issues with your adolescent. Be sure to talk to your doctor if you have questions or specific problems you need to discuss.

## What does my teenager need to know about sex?

*The truth!* Just like when he or she was little and asked you, “Where do babies come from?,” your adolescent son or daughter needs accurate information about sex. Around puberty and throughout the teen years, children may hear a lot of inaccurate information about sex. Parents play an important role in providing correct information as well as the guidance and values teens need to become responsible young men and women. Your teen needs accurate information on:

- Preventing STDs, including abstinence and “safe sex.”
- Preventing unintended pregnancy (options for birth control).


- Dealing with peer pressure and avoiding risky sexual situations.

*When should I talk to my teen about sex?* This depends on your child’s maturity and other factors. However, it’s best to open the conversation before your son or daughter begins encountering situations dealing with sexuality or relationships. Ideally, this should take place before your child and his or her friends start talking about dating or having girlfriends or boyfriends.

Talking about sex is likely to be embarrassing and uncomfortable for both parents and teens. However, it’s important to let teens know that they can talk to you openly about this important issue.

## What about preventing STDs?

Sexually active teens are at higher risk of STDs compared with adults. This includes not only HIV/AIDS, but also other diseases like syphilis, gonorrhea, and infection with *Chlamydia*, *Trichomonas*, and genital herpes. All teens need information on preventing/reducing the risk of STDs.

- *Not having sex (abstinence)* is the best way to prevent STDs. Teens should know that about half of all high school students do not have sex until they are older. There are many other ways to show affection and love for another person besides having sexual intercourse. Abstinence is a healthy choice for many teens. Delaying intercourse not only prevents the health risks of STDs but also avoids unintended pregnancy and other difficult consequences of becoming sexually intimate before your teen is emotionally and intellectually ready for it.
- “*Safe sex.*” Whether they are planning to be abstinent or not, all teens need to know about “safe sex” to reduce the risks of STDs, including HIV and AIDS.
  - Safe sex means using a condom (“rubber”) *every time* you have sexual intercourse. It also means not having sex if you don’t have a condom. 
  - *Limit the number of partners.* The more partners a person has, the higher the risk of contracting or spreading STDs.
  - *Talk to your partners about their sexual status.* Remember that a person can look perfectly healthy and still have an STD. People who inject drugs and men who have sex with other men are at high risk of HIV/AIDS.
- Teens who start having sex at younger ages and those who use drugs or alcohol also seem to be at higher risk of STDs. Both of these factors are related to risky behaviors, such as having a lot of partners and making poor decisions while under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

## What about preventing pregnancy?

Your teen needs to understand the consequences of unintended pregnancy. Teen mothers are less likely to finish high school and go to college and also earn less money in their lives. Their children are at increased risk of health problems and problems at school. Teenage boys need to understand that they are financially responsible for supporting their children.

- **Abstinence.** Abstinence (not having sex) is the best way to avoid getting pregnant. Sexually active teens are at a higher risk of unintended or unplanned pregnancy compared with adults.
- **Birth Control.** If your teen is sexually active, he or she needs some form of birth control to avoid unintended pregnancy. “Contraception” is another word for birth control. Teens may get incorrect information about their risk of pregnancy; for example, they may hear that a girl can’t get pregnant if she has sex during her period, if she douches after sex, or if the boy “pulls out” early. Teens need to know that *pregnancy is possible any time a male and a female have sexual intercourse!*
- **Birth control pills** are pills that girls and women take to reduce their risk of pregnancy. They are also called oral contraceptives or sometimes just “the pill.” These medications work by changing the woman’s hormone levels.
  - Birth control pills can only be prescribed by a doctor. They sometimes have side effects, and they are not safe for some women and girls to take. A woman should never take birth control pills that have not been prescribed for her.
- **Hormone shots (Depo-Provera).** Generally given once every 3 months. Hormone shots work in the same way as birth control pills but do not have to be taken every day. Again, this form of birth control must be prescribed by a doctor.
- **Hormone patches.** Worn on the skin.
- **Hormone implants (Norplant).** Placed under the skin through a small incision.
- **Emergency contraception (for example, “Plan B”).** Hormone pills that can prevent pregnancy if taken within 72 hours after unprotected sex.
- **Intrauterine devices (IUD).** Devices placed by a doctor within the uterus (womb).
- **Condoms.** The most important use of condoms is practicing “safe sex” to reduce the risk of STDs. Used properly, they can also reduce the risk of pregnancy. However, there are two things your teen should know:
  - Because they are not always used properly, condoms are *not* a particularly effective form of birth control. Most doctors would recommend some other form of birth control for a sexually active teen.

- None of the other options for birth control can prevent STDs. Even when using another method for birth control, condoms are still needed to reduce the risk of STDs.
- Other less-effective forms of birth control include the use of diaphragms (a device the woman places in her vagina before intercourse) and spermicides (substances that work by killing sperm in the vagina.)

## What does my teen need to know about healthy relationships?

Try to maintain an open dialogue with your teen about his or her relationships. Especially in older teens who are dating, boyfriend/girlfriend issues have a big emotional impact on their lives.

There are some important issues you should discuss with your teen to promote healthy and safe relationships:

- **Never let anyone pressure you into doing anything you don’t want to do.** That’s true not just for sex but also drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, and other temptations. Teens should have the willpower to walk away from people who are trying to manipulate them into doing things that don’t feel right.
- **Avoid risky situations.** Teens need to watch out for situations in which they might be vulnerable: for example, meeting people from Internet chat rooms, getting into cars with people they don’t know, going to parties where alcohol is being served. Set a rule that your teen can call you for a ride at any time, with “few questions asked.”
- **Stand up for yourself.** Teens may hear that “everybody’s” having sex or fear that they’ll lose a relationship if they don’t have sex. By talking to your teen and setting a good example, show the importance of maintaining good self-esteem in relationships and other areas of life.

## When should I call your office?

This chapter introduces some of the important sex and relationship issues you should discuss with your teen. Call our office if you or your teen has questions or concerns about sexuality, STDs, safe sex, or birth control and related physical and mental health issues.

## Where can I get more information?

Teen sexuality is an emotional and sometimes controversial issue. This can make it difficult to find accurate and unbiased information. Here are a few good resources for teens and parents with questions about sexual issues:

- The American Social Health Association provides information on sexual health and STDs. Online at [www.ashastd.org](http://www.ashastd.org), or call 1-800-227-8922. A special website for teens can be found at [www.iwannaknow.org](http://www.iwannaknow.org).

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- The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services offers information on talking with teens about sex and other topics, emphasizing abstinence. Online at [www.4parents.gov](http://www.4parents.gov).
- Planned Parenthood offers information and services related to birth control and sexual health. Online at [www.plannedparenthood.org](http://www.plannedparenthood.org), or call 1-800-230-PLAN (1-800-230-7526).