

Parents, Speak Up!

A Guide for Discussing Abstinence, Sex, and Relationships



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

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You want the best for your teen. This guide will help you discuss why abstinence is the healthiest choice for teenagers. The choices your teen makes now will affect his or her health and happiness for years to come.

This guide will:

- ◆ Help you provide teens with the information, encouragement and support they need to make healthy decisions.
- ◆ Provide suggestions for what to talk about with your teen, when to talk about it, and how to talk about it.
- ◆ Give you insight into how your teen feels and how you can encourage healthy behaviors.
- ◆ Detail important information on sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), teen pregnancy, and other complications of teen sexual activity.

You are the best person to help your teen son or daughter with these difficult issues. Remember that all discussions do not have to be just about sex; you should also talk about character, values, and making sound decisions.

1. Why Is It Important to Talk With Your Teen About Abstinence, Sex, and Relationships?

It is important to help young people confront the dangers facing them today. Some of those dangers are very different than they were when you were a teenager. Decisions teens make now can affect their health and character for the rest of their lives.

- ◆ STDs are much more common than most people realize. According to the most recent estimates, there were about 19 million new STD infections in 2000.¹ Of those, about one-fourth were among teenagers.²
- ◆ More diseases have been identified today than when you were a teenager. Some bacterial STDs, like syphilis and gonorrhea, have been documented for centuries. Today there are at least 25 identified STDs. At least eight new pathogens have been identified since 1980, including human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).³
- ◆ It's important that you and your teen understand that many of these diseases can be transmitted in a variety of ways. According to the National Physicians Center an STD is one that is passed from one person to another during sexual contact. The contact does not necessarily have to be intercourse.
- ◆ Young women are biologically more susceptible to certain STDs, including chlamydia, gonorrhea, and HIV, compared to other age groups of women.⁴
- ◆ At least 25 diseases are shared through sexual contact. Many of these diseases may begin with vague or mild symptoms. Unless tested, most people do not know they are infected until the infection may have caused permanent, life-long damage. They may have also unknowingly given the infection to past or present sexual partners.
- ◆ Teen pregnancy rates have been going down over the past several years, but they are still very high. If your teen becomes a parent, he or she is more likely to live in poverty⁵, is less likely to graduate from high school or college⁶, and may seriously risk the healthy development of his or her children.⁷
- ◆ Teens are still developing physically and emotionally. Abstinence helps protect teens from contracting a sexually transmitted disease, becoming pregnant, and having the emotional risk and responsibility involved with sex. Abstinence is the healthiest choice for teens because they are not ready for the adult emotions of sex and the adult choices that sex entails.
- ◆ Abstinence for your teen means that he or she would avoid voluntary intimate sexual contact (oral, anal or vaginal). This is the best choice emotionally and physically for all teens. The values that come from

abstinence, such as respect, responsibility, and self-control, will benefit their future relationships.

- ◆ By choosing abstinence, your teen will learn to recognize that the joys and benefits of experiencing sex as part of a healthy, trusting, committed adult relationship far outweigh any of the fleeting perceived benefits of early sexual activity.
- ◆ You owe it to your teen to provide guidance about abstinence that will benefit him or her for a lifetime.

Did you know that:

- ✓ *Most teens don't worry about STDs because they don't think they are at risk, but every day thousands of teens contract an STD?*
- ✓ *Many STDs don't have symptoms, so teens may not know they have an STD? You usually can't tell by looking at someone if they have an STD.*
- ✓ *STDs can cause serious, lifelong problems, sometimes even death?*
- ✓ *STDs in young people cost more than \$6.5 billion every year⁸?*

2. But There Is Good News...

Even though it may be difficult to talk to your teen about sexual issues, if your teen is like most teens, he or she wants you to.⁹ Your opinions and counsel matter.¹⁰ Thirty-seven percent of teen boys and girls surveyed said their parents have the most influence on their sexual decisions, compared to media, friends, health teachers, and religious leaders.¹¹

Research from the largest study ever done on teenagers found that teens who felt closely connected to their parents (meaning that they felt warmth, love, and care from their parents) were much less likely to be involved in risky behaviors like drugs, alcohol, tobacco use, and violence.¹²

Teens who felt connected to their parents were more likely to have their first sexual experience later than teens who were less connected to their parents.¹³

Sixty percent of teens said that when it comes to healthy, responsible relationships their parents are their primary models. Nearly 9 out of 10 teens surveyed agreed that it would be much easier to postpone sexual activity and avoid teen pregnancy if they were able to have more open, honest conversations about these topics with their parents.¹⁴

It's clear that teens want to talk with you about sex, values, and relationships. ***You can have a strong, positive influence on your teen's decisions about sex.***

Are you a "connected" parent? Do you:

- ✓ *Share your teen's hopes (with warmth and encouragement) for a great future?*
- ✓ *Know about your teen's activities and friends?*
- ✓ *Enjoy meals and family time with your teens?*
- ✓ *Encourage strong values and faith in your teens?*
- ✓ *Discuss tough topics and share opinions with your teens?*
- ✓ *Set guidelines and maintain high expectations?*



Who influences teens' sexual decisions the most?

- Parents 37%
- Friends 33%
- Religious Leaders 7%
- Teachers 4%
- Media 5%

3. Why Parents Don't Talk, but Should

You may be concerned that you don't know what to say or how to share information about sex and relationships with your teen. Although sex is a big topic in media and society, you may be uncomfortable discussing it. You may hesitate to talk about sex because:

- ◆ You think your teen doesn't listen.
- ◆ You think you don't know as much as health teachers and school nurses who know about issues like HIV and STDs.
- ◆ You're overwhelmed with the responsibilities of parenting and feel like you can't do it all.
- ◆ You worry your teen will think you're being judgmental.

To make healthy choices all teens need to:

- ✓ *Know they are important to their parent(s) and other adults in their lives, like grandparents;*
- ✓ *Have a plan for a bright future and healthy relationships;*
- ✓ *Be involved in healthy family, school, and community activities;*
- ✓ *Have support from parent(s), grandparent(s), teachers, and/or other adults to promote their decision not to have sex;*
- ✓ *Know the facts about sex, teen pregnancy, teen parenthood, and STDs; and*
- ✓ *Have the skills and support systems (parents, grandparents, teachers, and/or other adults) to say “no.”*



4. Tips for Talking With Your Teen

You want to be wise and prepared when you talk to your teen. Here are four tips that can help. They are easy to remember because they spell **WISE**.

“W” is for Welcome: Your teen needs to know that you care and are eager to talk. He or she needs to feel secure talking to you. No one enjoys dinner, activities, or conversations that are tense.

Your teen is more likely to talk and listen if neither of you is angry or upset. If your teen feels calm and supported, it is a lot easier for both of you to talk about things like sex, peer pressure, setting goals, building relationships, preparing for marriage, and being a parent.

So how do you create a supportive, safe environment so you can talk? First, you must show respect for each other. Second, your teen needs to be able to trust you. If you want your teen to make good choices, you have to be honest and reliable and expect the same. Third, you have to be available. You have to be there when your teen wants to talk—in the morning, after school, or at dinnertime. Studies show that teens who eat five or more meals together with their parents during the week make healthier choices.¹⁵ Take time to discuss news and television shows with sexual themes. Take opportunities to discuss peer pressure, teen pregnancy, STDs, and what’s happening in your community.

Tips for Talking:

Welcome: *Be available; treat each other with respect and trust.*

Interest: *Ask your teen questions about their opinions, friends, school, or movies, but let your teen tell his or her story.*

Support Good Goals: *Ask what your teen’s goals are, both for the long range and for the short term, and share your support.*

Encourage, Educate and Empower: *Give your teen the guidance, information, and skills to be successful.*

“I” is for Interest. Show your interest by asking questions in a comfortable order and style. If you ask your teen, “Do you think there is a lot of pressure to have sex at your school?” they are more likely to open up and talk to you than if you warn, “You’d better not be having sex!”

Adults generally introduce topics gently when they are talking to other adults. But sometimes they are not as gentle with their own children. Here are a few important guidelines to help you talk with your teen:

- ◆ Start with a general question or observation.
- ◆ Let your teen be the expert on his or her world.
- ◆ Ask about peer pressure.
- ◆ Ask how you can help.

For example, ask your teen:

- ◆ “Is there someone you really like?”
- ◆ “What kinds of things do you do together?”
- ◆ “Are you ever alone together?”
- ◆ “Have you ever felt pressured or wanted to have sex?”
- ◆ “If you’ve felt pressured or wanted to have sex, how did you handle that?”

“S” is for Support Good

Goals: If your teen son or daughter has hope for the future, they are more likely to make better choices. Do you know if your teen has goals? Do you know what they are? Ask your teen about his or her goals for marriage, family, and a career. Ask him or her about goals for jobs now and in the future and what his or her plans are to prepare for them. Then listen and offer support.

Share your hopes and values. Goals, values, and beliefs are important to teens. They are some of the most powerful reasons for the sexual choices teens make. You can guide your teen to develop the values of honesty, responsibility, and caring. Remember, values about education, marriage, and trust are more easily “caught” than “taught.” You and your behavior are the most valuable “values” educator!

Another part of goals and values for many families is their religious or spiritual base. If your family is involved with a church, mosque, synagogue, or other faith organization, encourage your teen to participate. Teens who are actively involved in a religious organization, who study faith, and pray or worship are less likely to begin early sexual activity.¹⁶ Share your family’s values with your teen and encourage service to others and the community.

“E” is for Encourage, Educate, and Empower:

Educate and encourage your teen to make healthy decisions. When topics come up about sex, do not think that you need to know all the answers. Be honest when you do not know, and offer to help find the facts.

If you made poor sexual decisions when you were young, that should not keep you from guiding your teen to healthier decisions. Many of today’s parents were teens when they began having sex. Now we know more about STDs, the limits of condom protection, and the consequences of sex at an early age.

“If I tell you not to do what I am doing, I am a hypocrite. If I tell you not to do what I have done, I am a teacher.”

—Author Unknown

Good News

There is evidence that teens are making healthier choices. Teen pregnancies are decreasing. And many young people are deliberately avoiding early sexual activity.

In 1991, 54 percent of high school teens reported they had sex. In 2003, that number dropped to 47 percent.¹⁷ Teens are becoming aware of the problems of teen sex and many are making good decisions, like choosing abstinence. You are key to helping your teen decide to wait for sex.

Effective parents not only teach and encourage their teens, they also set high expectations for them. And they clearly communicate those expectations. If you let your teen know that you believe in his or her ability to make healthy choices like waiting to have sex, he or she is more likely to make good choices.

House rules are a good way to let your teen know what you expect. They should be clear, fair, and consistently followed. Your teen may complain about the rules, but do not give in. House rules protect and encourage. And even though most teens may not admit it, they like to have rules that are enforced. Rules give structure to their lives and help them feel cared for and secure.

HOUSE RULES:

- ✓ Encourage supervised group activities. Know and support the groups your teen participates in.
- ✓ Set an age for dating. Be clear that there will be no dating before this age.
- ✓ Make it clear that your teen will not date anyone more than two years older or younger than he or she is. (Why? See Age Differences and Dating on page 5)
- ✓ Make sure that your teen is not spending a lot of time in unsupervised situations. Sports, tutoring, and even after-school jobs are positive ways to ensure that your teen is safe and productive during the after-school hours.
- ✓ Tell your teen that it is against the rules to entertain a boyfriend or girlfriend in personal spaces like bedrooms. “First sex” often happens at home in an unsupervised area of the house.
- ✓ Set clear guidelines for your teen’s outings: Where will you be? What will you be doing? Who will you be with? When will you be home? How can I reach you?
- ✓ No alcohol. No drugs. No tobacco.
- ✓ Be available to pick up your teen if he or she calls in an uncomfortable or threatening environment or situation.
- ✓ Set rules for what your teen son or daughter can listen to, read, and watch. Consider keeping the TV and computer in a public area of the home so you will know what your teen is watching.
- ✓ Be available to talk with your teen daily. Good communication supports good decisions.



AGE DIFFERENCES AND DATING

According to research conducted by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 13 percent of same-age relationships among those age 12–14 include sexual intercourse. If the partner is 2 years older, 26 percent of the relationships include sex. If the partner is 3 or more years older, 33 percent of the relationships include sex.

There are also laws written to protect young teens from older individuals who may force or pressure them to have sex. In many states, it is illegal for a young teen to have sex with someone three or more years older, even if the younger teen “consents” to sex. The older person can be charged with “sexual assault” or other crimes. In a study done in 1997, one in five school girls said they had been hit or sexually abused by a dating partner.* Young men are sometimes hit or punched by their girlfriends as well. Help your teen know that this is never a part of a healthy relationship.

*Silverman, J.G.; Raj, A; Mucci, L.A.; Hathaway, J.E.; “Dating violence against adolescent girls and associated substance use, unhealthy weight control, sexual risk behavior, pregnancy, and suicidality.” *JAMA*, 286:5

Start Talking Early

Some parents put off discussing sex until their child is a teenager. That can be too late. Three national surveys¹⁸ report that one out of five teens 14 and younger has had sex at least once.¹⁹ So talk early and often to your preteens and teens. Conversations about love, relationships, and sex could begin as early as six and should continue through the teenage years. If your child is old enough to ask questions, he or she is old enough to receive simple, but correct, answers. By the time your child is in middle school, you need to be straightforward. You need to talk about the health benefits of making good decisions and setting goals for the future. You need to talk about waiting to have sex and why it is the healthiest choice. And you need to talk about emotions and relationships. When your teen enters high school, you continue to reinforce what you have already talked about – dating relationships, values, self-discipline, and the consequences of nonmarital sex. So always leave the door open. When it’s time to talk about tough topics, you and your teen will have built a relationship that allows those conversations to sink in and have meaning.²⁰

What do you tell your teen?

- ✓ *Be firm in your decision to delay sex.*
- ✓ *Choose friends who respect your decisions and share your values.*
- ✓ *Avoid situations and people who pressure you to have sex.*
- ✓ *Find nonsexual ways to show you care (give a card or a nice comment).*
- ✓ *Find a keepsake to use as a daily reminder of your decision, such as a ring, necklace, or a pocket stone.*

What Do You Talk About?

Make sure your teen has the right information to make healthy choices. Your teen son or daughter can get the “facts” from lots of places, but they are not always accurate.

Talk About Growing Up

Body changes during puberty can happen early or late, fast or slow. Educate your child about changes that are or will be happening. Reassure teens through those self-conscious stages and talk to your health care provider about concerns you or your teen may have.

CONVERSATION STARTER:

How much do you think you’ve grown since last year? More changes are going to happen. Do you know what some of those changes are?

Some teens become confused when ideas, behaviors, and friendships with males and females change during puberty. Your teen needs to be able to talk to someone who is constant in his or her life.

CONVERSATION STARTER:

I haven’t seen Jason around here lately. Sometimes relationships with old friends change during the teen years. How are things going with your friends?



Talk About Waiting

Your teen son or daughter needs to know why you do not want them to have sex now. Tell them that abstinence is the healthiest choice. They will not have to worry about getting pregnant or getting someone pregnant. They will not have to worry about STDs, including HIV/AIDS. Nor will they have to worry that the person they are dating is only interested in them because of sex. Experiencing sex outside of marriage can jeopardize the likelihood of a happy marriage. Waiting for sex shows self-respect. **Let your teen know that even though they are capable of having sex, having sex will not make them an adult...making good choices will.**

What do teens think about teen sex?

- ✓ *More than half of all teens say that teens should not have sex.*
- ✓ *Nearly three out of four teens do not think it is embarrassing to say they are a virgin.*
- ✓ *Two-thirds of teens who have had sex wish they had waited.*
- ✓ *Nine out of 10 teens think it is important for society to send a strong message that teens should not have sex until they are at least out of high school.*

What If Your Teen Has Already Had Sex?

If you find out your son or daughter has already had sex, it is important for you to take them to a health care professional to be screened for pregnancy and STDs. Be sure to tell your teen that having multiple partners can be one of the biggest threats to their physical and emotional health. Tell them it is not too late to stop having sex, that it is never too late to make healthy choices. They are worth it!

Talk About How Your Teen Might Feel

If you think it is hard to say ‘no,’ just wait ‘til you say ‘yes.’”²¹ Many teens have found this out the hard way. In fact, **two out of three teens who have had sex say they wish they had waited.**²² If teens have sex, not only can they get diseases, get pregnant, or get someone pregnant, they can also get a broken heart. When teens were asked in a survey what they thought about sex, more than half said sexual activity for high school-aged teens was not acceptable.²³ Three out of four teens did not think it was embarrassing to admit they were a virgin. And 9 out of 10 teens thought it was important that society sends a strong message that teens should abstain from sex until they are at least out of high school.²⁴

CONVERSATION STARTER:

That song has a good beat, but the song makes it seem like having sex makes you a man (or woman). Do you think that’s true?

Talk About STDs

Review with your teen the facts about STDs, and tell your teen about the health dangers of STDs. Remember to say that sexual contact includes oral sex, anal sex, and vaginal intercourse — it is any close contact with the genital area. Any of these activities can transmit an STD.



Teen girls get infected with STDs more easily than adult women. That seems strange since teens are usually in better health than adults. One reason they may be more easily infected is that they are still maturing and have less developed linings in their reproductive tract.²⁵ Infections can enter and grow more easily. These infections can lead to scarring that may result in lifelong problems.

CONVERSATION STARTER:

They never talk about STDs on that television show, even though they have lots of stuff about sex. Have you heard about anybody at your school who has gotten an STD?



CONVERSATION STARTER:

I overheard a couple of kids from the neighborhood saying that, if you're dating someone, you have to have sex with them in order to prove that you're loyal and you're not cheating on them. Do you think that's what loyalty is about?

Talk About Condoms

When new STDs were first noticed 20–30 years ago, many people believed that they could be fully controlled if everyone used a condom correctly every time they had sex. The argument was that it made good sense to just cover up any area that might be infected or might become infected.

But today we know differently. We know that even when teens begin using condoms, they do not always keep using them. For instance, younger teen boys are more likely to use a condom than older teen boys. About half of teen boys who do use condoms do not use them every time they have sex.²⁶

CONVERSATION STARTER:

I heard a commercial on the radio about always being prepared by having condoms. Do you or your friends think that condoms really make sex safe?

Even if a condom is used every time someone has sex, that person could still become infected with an STD or get pregnant.

When condoms slip or break or are used incorrectly, they do not protect against infections. They do not protect against STDs that live on skin and membranes that are not covered by the condom. Many bacteria and viruses like herpes and human papillomavirus (HPV) can be shared, even with part of the reproductive tract covered.



Talk About Teen Pregnancy

Many teens who have sex use contraception and believe they are protected. But, because they do not always use it consistently or correctly, many get pregnant or get someone pregnant.²⁷ Over 850,000 teen girls became pregnant in 2000.²⁸ About one of every three girls in the United States gets pregnant at least once before age 20.²⁹ For those who

become teen parents, one thing is certain — life changes for them. Many teen mothers never finish high school. Teen mothers and their babies are more likely to have health problems. And families started by teen mothers are more likely to be poor and end up on welfare.

CONVERSATION STARTER:

Ms. Martin told me that there are five girls at your school that are pregnant. What do your friends think about teenagers having a baby?

The good news is that over the past 10 years, the rate of teen pregnancy has decreased. More teens are choosing abstinence. Of the teens who are sexually active, more are using contraception.

Did you know that babies born to teen mothers are more likely to:

- ✓ *Be born too small or die during the first year of life.*
- ✓ *Have chronic health problems.*
- ✓ *Have learning and school problems.*
- ✓ *Get in trouble with the law.*
- ✓ *Become teen parents themselves.*

Did you know that teens who become parents:

- ✓ *Are more likely to end up poor or on welfare.*
- ✓ *Have fewer job opportunities.*
- ✓ *Have fewer educational opportunities.*
- ✓ *Are less likely to marry.*

Talk About Sex, Teens, and the Law

You and your teen need to know the basics of sex, teens, and the law. Each state has laws that set the age at which someone can give consent to have sex, marry, or seek medical care as an independent person. These laws are written to protect young teens from older people who force or pressure them to have sex. In many states it is illegal for a young teen to have sex with someone two or more years older, even if the younger teen “consents” to sex. The older person can be charged with statutory rape or other crimes.

CONVERSATION STARTER:

I know that a lot of your friends from work have their own cars. But they're a lot older than you are, and I don't want you to ride with them alone.

Talk About Money

Talk to your teen about the financial responsibilities of being a parent. Young women are not the only ones responsible when a baby is born. Young men need to know that they will be responsible for 18 years of child support for any child they father, even if they were a teenager when they caused the pregnancy and even if they move to another state or if they join the military. A judge can order that their child support payments are taken out of their paychecks.

CONVERSATION STARTER:

Did you know that a portion of a guy's paychecks can be withheld for the next 18 years if he gets a girl pregnant and does not pay child support?



Talk About Preparing for the Future

Healthy relationships do not just happen. They require effort and are built on trust. Healthy relationships, whether between friends, romantic partners, or within families, promote positive, healthy behaviors. They are founded on common goals and interests, unselfishness, mutual respect, faithfulness, caring, and commitment. They encourage and enable individuals to grow and progress.

CONVERSATION STARTER:

I was at the store yesterday and ran into Kendrick, Mrs. Jakes' son. He joined the military after high school. What do you think you want to do when you graduate from high school?

Teens also need to know that marriage has health benefits. Not only do married couples tend to be more financially secure and stable, they also have lower rates of depression, live longer, have better health, and are happier and more satisfied with parenting. They also enjoy a better sex life.³⁰

CONVERSATION STARTER:

I know that you would like to have a family some day. Tell me about what you would look for in a wife (or husband). How will you know she (he) can be trusted to share the future with you?

Other Issues to Discuss

Sex is not the only topic you should talk to your teen about. Risky behaviors often go together. Teens who smoke are more likely to drink alcohol and use drugs. Teens who drink alcohol and use drugs are more likely to be sexually active. When teens were asked in a recent survey if they were drinking or using drugs the last time they had sex, 25 percent of them said “yes.” Teens who drink are seven times more likely than teens who don't drink to have had sex. And teens who use drugs are five times more likely to have had sex.³¹ So when you're talking about sex, also talk about other health risks like alcohol, tobacco, drugs, and violence.

CONVERSATION STARTER:

I heard that there was a wild party last weekend after the game. Have your friends been talking about it? Did you know that alcohol and drugs really increase the chances of having sex and getting a disease?

5. Helping Teens Develop Refusal Skills

You cannot go everywhere with your teen. That is why it is important for your teen to choose good friends. Get to know their friends. Know what your teen is doing and who your teen is with. Foster healthy peer group friendships by welcoming your teen's friends into your home when you are there. Encourage your teen to participate in activities at the local community center with other kids his or her age. Keep your teen busy and involved in productive activities with other young people who are making healthy choices. Support your teen in his or her activities. If your teen is playing baseball, be sure that you are in the bleachers if possible, or ask about the game afterwards to let your teen know that you are a proud parent. If your teen is in a play, be in the front row. While you are there, get to know the parents of the other young people who are participating.

Even when your teen's close friends are making healthy choices and avoiding sex, drugs, and alcohol, your teen will probably be in situations that are unexpected. So he or she needs to learn how to refuse. Let your teen know that you know about peer pressure and how strong it can be. Then help your teen think through and plan what he or she would do in a tough or uncomfortable situation.

Teach your teen the "**N.I.C.E.**" way to say "no."³² Teens are sensitive to peer pressure. They do not want their peers to make fun of

them or ridicule them. So when your teen is confronted by a situation that violates his or her values, comfort, or safety, he or she should be prepared to say "no" firmly, but graciously, by following these four steps:

N – Say "No." Not "maybe" or "later." Teach your teen to set boundaries and be decisive. If your teen decides not to have sex before being confronted by the pressure to have sex, it will be easier to say "no" when the situation arises.

I – Follow with an "I" statement: "I plan to wait several years before I have sex." Or "I'm not going to have sex until I marry." Or "Sex isn't part of my game plan right now."

C – If pressure continues, "Change." Teach your teen to change the topic: "Did you see the game on TV last night?" Or change their conversation partner: "Julie is over there; I need to ask her something." Or change the location: "I'm going back into the kitchen."

E – If these strategies do not help, your teen needs an "Exit" plan. Teens should leave a bad situation immediately. If your teen does not have a way home, you or some other trusted adult will need to pick him or her up. It is a good idea for you and your teen to have a prearranged "code phrase" that means "Come and pick me up. And hurry!"

NICE Refusal Skills:

Saying "No" without being a jerk

N=No

I=An "I" statement

C=Change things

E=Exit

Practice these steps with your teen. Review what he or she would do in all different kinds of uncomfortable situations. Make sure your teen remembers the steps by asking, "What would you do if..." Then listen to how your teen would handle pressure to make risky choices. Help your teen know how to show affection and caring without sexual behavior. As a parent you support your teen's good choices because you love your child and want your teen to have a great future.

Parents, Speak Up!

Remember, you are the most important link between your teen, your teen's health, and a bright future. You are his or her most valued source of support, information, and hope. You can provide the encouragement and direction that can help your teen avoid the health risks of early sex, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted disease. It is a tough job, but the rewards are remarkable.

You are not alone. Schools, religious organizations, communities, and youth leaders also play important roles in helping young people make healthy choices.

What Are the Facts About Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs)?

STDs are much more common than most people realize. Because so many are undiagnosed, experts can only estimate that there were nearly 19 million new cases of STDs among Americans in 2000.³³ Historically, about 25 percent of all new STD infections occur in teens each year.³⁴

STD Data

- ✓ *There are at least 25 different STDs.*
- ✓ *STDs are the most common infectious disease in the US.*
- ✓ *Nearly 19 million Americans get an STD every year.*
- ✓ *Most teens do not think they are at risk of an STD.*
- ✓ *One-fourth of all new infections are among teens.*

At least 25 diseases are shared through sexual contact, and many of these diseases may begin with vague or mild symptoms. Unless tested, most people do not know they are infected until the infection may have caused permanent, lifelong damage. They may have also unknowingly given the infection to past or present sexual partners.

Chlamydia

For example, an STD called chlamydia is very common in the United States and the rest of the world. Between 3 and 14 percent of teen girls and young women (15 to

STD Facts

- ✓ *STDs can be transmitted through oral, anal, and vaginal sex.*
- ✓ *Many STDs do not have any symptoms, but can cause serious, lifelong problems.*
- ✓ *Testing is the only sure way to find out if someone is infected.*
- ✓ *Viral STDs cannot be cured by medicines.*
- ✓ *Bacterial STDs can be cured by antibiotics, but cannot reverse any damage that has already occurred.*
- ✓ *Having some active STDs makes it easier to get HIV.*
- ✓ *Condoms do not provide complete protection for STDs.*

24 years old) who come into family planning clinics have this disease.³⁵ Again, it is important that you tell your teen son or daughter that chlamydia often does not have any symptoms, or, if it does, they may be mild lower stomach pains at the onset of the infection.

Antibiotics can cure chlamydia if a person is tested and found to be infected. But if it is not treated soon enough, chlamydia can cause scars in the fallopian tubes where a pregnancy begins. These scars can cause a tubal pregnancy (where the developing baby is trapped in the fallopian tube) or infertility (when the young woman can't have a baby because scars block parts of her reproductive tract). Chlamydia, and a similar but more damaging infection called gonorrhea, can cause pain in the lower abdomen in women,

even after treatment. In men, both chlamydia and gonorrhea can cause a discharge and pain in the penis. But most men do not know they are infected.

Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

Another common STD is called "human papillomavirus" or "HPV." It's sometimes called "genital warts" since some types of this virus can make warts on reproductive areas like the penis. In 2000, an estimated 9.2 million youth age 15-24 were infected with HPV.³⁶ Sexually active teen boys and young men are commonly infected with HPV as well.

Experts used to think that HPV was mostly a nuisance. But several years ago, doctors noticed that almost every person diagnosed with cervical cancer also had certain strains of HPV. We now know that some types of HPV can cause cancers of the cervix, the throat, the penis, and the anus.³⁷ Most people who get the infection do not get cancer because the virus is usually cleared from their systems within one to two years. But no one can predict who will get better and who will have problems. Because Pap smears check to see if any cervical cancers are developing, they are an important part of reproductive health care. Tell your teen that not having sex is the only sure way to avoid HPV because the virus can be on skin that is not covered or protected by condoms.

STDs can cause:

- ✓ *Pelvic inflammatory disease*
- ✓ *Scarring of the reproductive track*
- ✓ *Infertility*
- ✓ *Infection in babies*
- ✓ *Lifelong illness or pain*
- ✓ *Chronic abdominal pain*
- ✓ *Cancers*
- ✓ *Death (HIV and Hepatitis B)*

HIV/AIDS

Because the HIV virus is in body fluids such as semen and vaginal secretions, condoms are more effective in preventing HIV infection than in preventing HPV infection. However, condoms do not provide complete protection for HIV. Experts estimate that condoms, when used consistently, prevent HIV infection about 85 percent of the time.³⁸ Therefore, someone can get infected with HIV even if they use a condom every time they have sex. In the early years of the AIDS epidemic, infection with HIV meant certain death. Today people with AIDS have serious health problems and a shortened life expectancy.

Today medicines can help people live longer, but none can cure the HIV infection. Tell your teen that it is easier to get HIV if you already have another STD, like chlamydia, HPV, or herpes. And people who have HIV can pass the infection on to their sexual partners. Remember, you cannot tell by looking if someone is infected with HIV.

Herpes

Herpes simplex virus (HSV) or “herpes” is one of the most common infections in the world. There are two main types: one that infects the reproductive tract, and one that infects the mouth and lips. Both types can also infect other areas of the body. When someone first gets infected, he or she can have a fever, aches, pains, and many little painful blisters close to where the virus made contact. The soft skin or membranes on the penis, scrotum, or female genital region can become very sore, or there can be painful “fever blisters” around the mouth. This first set of symptoms generally lasts one to two weeks. But, like HIV, herpes has no cure. The infected person will have it for the rest of his or her life.

Symptoms often recur throughout life, but recurrences generally are not as severe as the initial outbreak. There are new medicines that can help control the symptoms if they are severe, but some people do not need medication because their recurrences are mild. An infected person can give the infection to someone else through sex or close contact with the skin, mouth, or reproductive tract. They can infect someone even if they do not have blisters or other symptoms. Mothers can pass herpes to their babies when they are born.

There are many other STDs, like some types of hepatitis, which are shared through sexual contact. Some that you need to know about are listed in the chart at the back of this guide. Many of these diseases can cause problems for babies born to women who have the infection. It is important for you to know about these diseases so you can help your teen make healthy choices to ensure a healthy body and future. HIV and most STDs can only be diagnosed with special tests. **Tell your teen that you can't just look at someone and tell if they are infected.**

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What Parents Need to Know about Sexually Transmitted Diseases

Common STDs	Bacterial Sexually Transmitted Diseases			Viral Sexually Transmitted Diseases		
	Chlamydia	Gonorrhea	Syphilis	HSV: Herpes Simplex	Human Papillomavirus (HPV) and Genital Warts	HIV/AIDS
Where is it found?	Vagina, cervix, urethra, throat, and anus	Vagina, cervix, urethra, throat, and anus	Genital area and/or on mouth	Vagina, cervix, urethra, anus, mouth, throat, and all genital areas	Vagina, cervix, urethra, anus, scrotum, mouth, throat, and all genital areas	Blood, semen, vaginal fluid, and breast milk
What are the possible symptoms?	May or may not have early symptoms, discharge from penis and vagina, chronic low stomach pain, chronic pelvic infection/fever, infertility may result (mostly in women), can infect babies	Vaginal or penile pain and discharge, chronic low stomach pain, pelvic infection/fever, infertility may result (mostly in women), can infect babies	Painless chancre (sore), untreated can spread to the brain and/or heart, can cause birth defects and lesions on infants' skin and other problems with their organs	Painful blisters, fever, swollen glands, symptoms recur throughout life, can infect babies	Few early symptoms; may cause warts; can cause cancer of the cervix, anus and penis; can infect babies	No early symptoms, destroys immune system, multiple severe infections, no known cure, fatal illness, can infect babies
How can it be spread?	Oral, anal, and vaginal sex; mother to child	Oral, anal, and vaginal sex; mother to child	Oral, anal, and vaginal sex; contact with sores; mother to child	Oral, anal, and vaginal sex; contact with infected skin; mother to child	Anal and vaginal sex; contact with infected skin; mother to child (rare)	Oral, anal, and vaginal sex; IV drug use; mother to child
Can condoms help if always used (100% of the time and correctly)?	Condom use is associated with some decreased risk. (Risk reduction is 50% or less.)	Condom use is associated with some decreased risk. (Risk reduction may be 50% or less.)	Condom use is associated with some decreased risk. (Risk reduction is 50% or less.)	Condom use is associated with some decreased risk. (Risk reduction is 50% or less.)*	No evidence that condom use reduces risk of HPV infection. Some evidence that condoms reduce the risk of HPV-associated diseases.	Condom use decreases the risk of HIV/AIDS transmission by approximately 85%.
How many infected teens are reported?	3–14% of women ages 15–24 who visited family planning clinics (2003)	0.1–2.8% of women ages 15–24 who visited family planning clinics (based on reporting states)	In 2003, there were about 322 cases of primary and secondary syphilis in 15–19 year olds.	In 2000, an estimated 4.2 million youth ages 15–24 were infected.	In 2000, an estimated 9.2 million youth ages 15–24 were infected.	By the end of 2003, about 37,600 individuals ages 13–24 had been diagnosed with AIDS.
What are the treatments?	Antibiotics (permanent damage may have occurred)	Antibiotics (permanent damage may have occurred)	Antibiotics (permanent damage may have occurred)	Symptom control, but no cure	Monitor through pap smears for cancer changes; Surgery for warts and cervical growths	Symptom control with AIDS medicines (antiretroviral drugs); No cure

Notes: *This takes into account as yet unpublished data, which were presented at the 2002 National STD Conference, sponsored by the CDC. See below for citation.

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