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## STDs

Sometimes it's difficult to see your child as anything but that: a child. Yet, in many ways, teens today are growing up faster than ever. They learn about violence and sex through the media and their peers, but they rarely have all the facts. That's why it's so important for you to talk to your kids about sex, particularly sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

Teens are one of the groups most at risk for contracting STDs. You can help your kids stay safe by talking to them and sharing some important information about STDs and prevention.

Before you tackle this sensitive subject, however, it's important to make sure you not only know what to say, but how and when to say it.

### Timing Is Everything

It's never too late to talk to your kids about STDs, even if they're already teens. A late talk is better than no talk at all. But the best time to start having these discussions is some time during the preteen years.

Of course, the exact age varies from child to child: Some kids are more aware of sex at age 9 than others are at age 11. You'll need to read your child's cues.

No matter how old your child is, if he or she starts having questions about sex, it's a good time to talk about STDs.

Questions are a good starting point for a discussion. When kids are curious, they're often more open to hearing what their parents have to say.

But not all kids ask their parents questions about sex. One way to initiate a discussion is to use a media cue, like a TV program, a movie, or an article in the paper, and ask what your child thinks about it.

Another way is to use the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine as a starting point for a conversation. The HPV vaccine is recommended for preteen girls (and also boys), and has the best chance of protecting against infection if the series of shots is given before someone becomes sexually active.

The surest way to have a healthy dialogue is to establish lines of communication early on. If parents aren't open to talking about sex or other personal subjects when their kids are young, kids will be a lot less likely to seek out mom or dad when they're older and have questions.

Spend time talking with your kids from the beginning and it'll be much easier later to broach topics like sex because they'll feel more comfortable sharing thoughts with you.

## Tips for Talking

To make talking about STDs a little easier for both you and your kids:

- **Be informed.** STDs can be a frightening and confusing subject, so it may help if you read up on STD transmission and prevention. You don't want to add any misinformation and being familiar with the topic will make you feel more comfortable. If kids ask for information that you're not sure about, find out the answer from a reliable source and get back to them.
- **Ask what your kids already know about STDs and what else they'd like to learn.** Remember, though: Kids often already know more than you realize, although much of that information could be incorrect. Parents need to provide accurate information so their kids can make the right decisions and protect themselves.
- **Ask what your kids think about sexual scenarios on TV and in movies** and use those fictional situations as a way to talk about safe sex and risky behavior.
- **Encourage your kids to raise any fears, questions, or concerns** they have.
- **Make your kids feel that they're in charge of this talk, not you,** by getting their opinions on whatever you discuss. If you let their questions lead the way, you'll have a much more productive talk than if you stick to an agenda or give a lecture.
- **Explain that the only sure way to remain STD-free is to *not* have sex or intimate contact with anyone** outside of a committed, monogamous relationship, such as marriage. However, those who are having sex should always use condoms to protect against STDs, even when using another method of birth control. Most condoms are made of latex, but both male and female condoms made of polyurethane are available for people with a latex allergy.

## Common Questions About STDs

Depending on what your kids have heard from friends and the media, their questions will probably be fairly straightforward, such as:

- **What is an STD?** An STD is a sexually transmitted disease.
- **How does someone catch one?** These infections and diseases are spread from one individual to another during anal, oral, or vaginal sex. They also can be spread by fingers or objects after they have touched genitals or body fluids.
- **What do STDs do to a person's body?** The type of STD determines what kinds of symptoms, if any, someone has. Some STDs cause virtually no symptoms, whereas others can cause the person to have discharge from the vagina or penis, sores, or pain.

But even when there are no symptoms, if STDs are untreated, they can lead to damage to the internal organs and may cause long-term health problems, like infertility or cancer. This is why anyone who has had any type of sex (vaginal, oral, or anal)

needs to be tested for STDs regularly.

- **Are STDs curable or do you have them forever?** Some STDs like chlamydia and gonorrhea can be cured with antibiotics, but some infections — like herpes or HIV — have no cure.
- **Are people who catch STDs somehow bad?** Getting an STD does not mean that someone is a bad person, just that he or she needs to learn how to prevent future infections.
- **Can you tell that someone has an STD just by looking at him or her?** People often may not even know that they're infected themselves. Although there may be visible signs around the genitals with certain kinds of STDs, like genital warts and herpes, most of the time, there is no way to look at someone and know that he or she has an STD.

Answering any of these questions or others as openly as possible is the best approach. It's up to you to gently correct any misinformation your kids may have learned. And always answer questions honestly without being overly dramatic.

It can be tough, but try not to be too emotional or preachy. You want your kids to know that you're there to support and help, not condemn.

## Finding Reliable Information

Communicating with your kids may not be simple, but it's necessary. If you're always available to talk, discussions will come easier. Literature from your doctor's office or organizations like Planned Parenthood can provide answers.

And websites like [TeensHealth.org](http://TeensHealth.org) discuss STDs and sex in teen-friendly language. Viewing them together can help you and your kids start talking.

Your child's school can be an information resource. Find out when sexuality will be covered in health or science class and read the texts that will be taught. The PTA may even offer sessions about talking to teens where you can share tips and experiences with other parents.

And don't shy away from discussing STDs or sex out of fear that talking will make kids want to have sex. Informed teens are *not* more likely to have sex; but when they do become sexually active they *are* more likely to practice safe sex.

If you try these tactics and still don't feel comfortable talking about STDs, make sure your kids can talk to someone who will have accurate information: a doctor, counselor, school nurse, teacher, or another family member.

Kids and teens need to know about STDs, and it's better that they get the facts from someone trustworthy instead of discovering them on their own.

Reviewed by: Larissa Hirsch, MD

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Note: All information is for educational purposes only. For specific medical advice, diagnoses, and treatment, consult your doctor.