HEALTH BASICS

Talking with your teenager about sex

An ongoing, age-appropriate conversation about sexual health, relationships, consent, and safety.

WHAT IT IS
Ongoing conversations about sex, relationships, consent, and health

WHERE IT COMES UP
Growing up, dating, healthcare visits, media, and school

WHY IT MATTERS
Supports informed choices, safety, and access to healthcare

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease or a single formal talk

WHO TO ASK
A pediatrician, family clinician, nurse, or sexual health service

HOW IT IS CHECKED
None

Overview

Talking with your teenager about sex means having honest, age-appropriate conversations about bodies, relationships, consent, sexual activity, and health. It is usually more helpful to think of this as many small conversations rather than one formal "sex talk."

You do not need to assume that your teenager is sexually active. The goal is to give them accurate information before they need it and to make it easier for them to ask for help later.

Sexual health includes more than pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, or STIs. It also includes respect, personal boundaries, sexual orientation, gender identity, online behavior, and recognizing pressure or abuse.

These conversations can reflect your family's values. They should also include clear medical facts. If you do not know an answer, it is reasonable to say so and look for reliable information together.

How it works

Teenagers receive messages about sex from friends, school, social media, pornography, entertainment, and advertising. Some information is accurate, while some leaves out consent, emotional effects, pregnancy risk, or STI risk.

Regular conversations give your teenager a place to check what they hear. Everyday events can provide an opening, such as a television storyline, a health class, a relationship in their social group, or a healthcare appointment.

Start by asking what they already know. Listen without interrupting, then correct errors calmly. Use direct words for body parts and sexual activity rather than vague warnings. It is also helpful to explain that:

Include relationships between people of any gender. Do not assume your teenager's sexual orientation, gender identity, or type of sexual activity. Inclusive language makes accurate advice easier to give and may make your teenager more willing to speak honestly.

Healthcare visits are another part of sexual health education. Teenagers are often given some private time with a clinician. Confidentiality rules differ by age, location, service, and safety concern. Insurance records or billing notices may also reveal that care occurred.

- Consent means freely agreeing to a specific activity
- Consent can be withdrawn at any time
- Silence, pressure, fear, or intoxication are not consent
- Condoms can reduce STI and pregnancy risk when used correctly
- Other birth control methods can help prevent pregnancy but may not prevent STIs
- Anyone can ask a healthcare professional about sexual health

Why it matters for your health

Accurate information can help teenagers recognize consent, understand pregnancy and STI risks, and know where to obtain healthcare. Evidence does not show that age-appropriate sexuality education causes young people to start having sex.

A calm conversation may make it easier for your teenager to tell you about a missed period, possible STI exposure, unwanted contact, relationship pressure, or questions about contraception. Early access to care can matter because some tests and treatments are time-sensitive.

These talks also shape how your teenager understands respect. They need to know that pressure, threats, monitoring, humiliation, and controlling access to friends or contraception

are not healthy relationship behaviors.

What can go wrong

Misinformation can lead to misunderstanding about pregnancy, contraception, STIs, or consent. For example, pregnancy can occur the first time someone has vaginal sex. A person can also have an STI without obvious symptoms.

Situations connected with sexual health include:

Arrange prompt healthcare advice after possible STI exposure, sex without effective pregnancy protection, a missed period, a positive pregnancy test, genital sores, unusual discharge, pain with urination, or pelvic or testicular pain. These concerns do not automatically mean that your teenager has an infection or another condition.

Recent sexual assault needs prompt, sensitive medical care. A specialist service or emergency department can assess injuries and discuss pregnancy prevention, STI testing or preventive treatment, and evidence collection. Reporting and confidentiality rules differ by location.

Call emergency services if your teenager is in immediate danger, has severe bleeding or severe pain, is unconscious, or cannot be safely awakened. Routine questions about relationships, contraception, testing, or vaccines can usually be discussed at a regular healthcare or sexual health appointment.

- Unintended pregnancy , including after sex without contraception or a contraceptive failure
- Sexually transmitted infections , such as chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, HIV, herpes, and human papillomavirus
- Sexual coercion or assault , including activity obtained through pressure, threats, force, or inability to consent
- Dating abuse , including physical violence, sexual pressure, stalking, and controlling behavior
- Non-consensual image sharing , which can cause harm and may have legal consequences
- Emotional distress , including fear, shame, or anxiety about relationships, identity, pregnancy, or sexual experiences

What you can do

Choose a private, low-pressure time. Conversations may feel easier during a walk or car

journey because constant eye contact is not required. Avoid starting when either of you is angry or rushed.

Ask open questions, such as, "What have you heard about consent?" or "Do people at school know where to get reliable information?" Try not to react with shock. A strong reaction may close down the conversation even when your concern is understandable.

Give practical information rather than only saying "do not have sex." Your teenager should know where condoms and contraception are available, how pregnancy and STI testing work, and how to contact a clinician or sexual health service. You can ask a clinician:

Make it clear that your teenager can call you for help without first explaining everything. You can discuss consequences later, once they are safe.

Set expectations for digital behavior. Talk about pressure to send sexual images, screenshots, forwarding without permission, location sharing, and contact from unknown adults. Laws involving sexual images of minors differ, so avoid making broad legal claims. A school safeguarding lead, clinician, or local legal support service can help if an image has been shared.

Keep useful records where your teenager can find them, including clinic contact details, current medicines, allergies, vaccination history, and the date of the last menstrual period if relevant. Do not secretly monitor intimate health information unless there is a serious safety concern.

If your teenager discloses assault or coercion, thank them for telling you, say that it was not their fault, and focus on immediate safety and medical support. Avoid pressing for a detailed account. A trained service can explain the next steps.

- Which sexual health services are confidential for teenagers locally?
- How could insurance or billing affect privacy?
- Which STI tests are available, and when are they useful?
- Is my teenager up to date with routine vaccines, including HPV vaccination?
- What options are available after unprotected sex or possible assault?

Common questions

What if my teenager seems too young?

You can start before dating or sexual activity. Early conversations may cover body autonomy, privacy, respectful relationships, puberty, and how to ask for help. Add more detail as their questions and circumstances change.

Will talking about contraception encourage sex?

Providing accurate health information does not require approving of sexual activity. You can explain your values while making sure your teenager knows how pregnancy and STI risks are reduced.

What if they refuse to talk?

Keep the invitation open and try brief conversations rather than an interrogation. Offer reliable written information or suggest another trusted adult or healthcare professional. Avoid demanding personal details simply to test honesty.

Should I ask whether they are sexually active?

You can ask calmly and explain why the information matters. A broader question such as, "Is there anything about relationships, sexual health, or pressure that you want help with?" may be easier to answer.

Should a teenager see a clinician alone?

Private time with a clinician can help teenagers ask sensitive questions. You can ask the clinic how confidentiality works and when information must be shared because of abuse, immediate danger, or other legal requirements.

What if I say something wrong?

Correct it later. Saying, "I checked, and what I told you was not accurate," models responsible use of health information. You do not need to have every answer for the conversation to be useful.

Sources

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