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## Whose kids? Our kids!

# Teens and sexual risk-taking

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**W**hile you may not want your child to be sexually active, the reality is that your teen may engage in sexual activity without your knowledge or approval. Just one sexual experience may be enough to endanger your child's life. The risks of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV (the virus that causes AIDS) are *real* in today's world.

## Teens and sexual risk-taking

**T**eens who are sexually active, but who don't use birth control are taking a big risk. Studies show that only about half of teens report always using birth control. Sexually active teens who report inconsistent or no use of condoms are at higher risk for contracting HIV than youth who are sexually active and always use condoms. While using a condom greatly reduces the chance of contracting HIV, it does not eliminate it. The only real "safe sex" is no sex.

While it may be difficult to accept, a startling number of teens report having more than one sexual partner. The risk of contracting a sexually transmitted disease like HIV increases when a person has sex with more than one person. The risk increases even more when a condom is not used. Thousands of young people ages 13–24 in the U.S. are infected with AIDS.

## Parents make a difference!

**R**esearch has shown that when parents talk with their teens about sex it does *not* increase sexual activity. In fact, some studies show that talking with your teen may actually help delay the onset of sexual activity. Starting a conversation about sex may seem embarrassing or awkward, but if you, as a parent, don't want your teen to have sex, you should make sure your teen understands and hears this message loud and clear. Studies show that teens are more likely to delay having sex if their parents disapprove of their being sexually active.

Even if you are certain your teen isn't having sex, these conversations are valuable. Remember—sooner or later, your teen will almost certainly become sexually active. Here are some ideas on sexuality-related issues that you may wish to discuss.

- ✓ Sexuality is much more than physical intercourse. Kissing and intimate touching are expressions of sexuality. Sharing feelings and emotions can also be expressions of sexuality. Help your teen develop a sense of respect for him- or herself, standards for their sexual behavior and alternatives to sexual intercourse.
- ✓ Encourage your teen to talk. If your teen comes to you with a sexuality-related question or comment, respond with "I'm really glad you feel comfortable enough asking me that," or "How did you come to that conclusion?" Never belittle or embarrass your teen with responses such as "Don't ever ask me a question like that again," or "How could a child of mine say such a thing?"
- ✓ Take advantage of teachable moments. For example, if a beer commercial uses women in bikinis to sell beer, ask your teen, "Why do you think they associate beer with beautiful women? What could happen if a person combines alcohol and sex?"
- ✓ Practice with your teen how to handle sexual pressure. Teens may strongly believe they will not have sex, yet when they find themselves in a compromising situation, they don't know what to do. Help teens practice how to act on their values, refuse sexual pressure and make good decisions.

Starting a conversation about sex may seem embarrassing or awkward, but if you don't want your teen to have sex, you should make sure your child hears the message loud and clear.

But if your teen is already having sex (and do you really know?), you need to talk about contraception and safe sex. In fact, it is critical that you *do* talk!

- ✓ Don't compromise your values. Many parents believe teenage sexual activity is wrong. If this is how you feel, make it clear to your teen that you disapprove of young people having sex.
- ✓ Remain cool and collected. Calmly explain to your teen that the best way to prevent becoming infected with sexually transmitted diseases, HIV or becoming pregnant is not to have sexual intercourse. You may even want to say, "It's very awkward for me to talk with you about sex, but it's so important to your well-being that I really can't make any excuses." Remember that angry confrontations, lectures or strict curfews often backfire and can do more harm than good. If your teen decides to have sex (perhaps against your wishes), insist that some protection is used. Condoms *must* be used each and every time they have intercourse. Remind your teen that condoms are not fool-proof—the only safe sex is no sex.
- ✓ Clearly communicate your disapproval of using alcohol or any other drug. Alcohol and other drugs impair good decision-making and can lead to disaster. Research has found that teens are less likely to use condoms after drinking alcohol than when sober. This places them at even higher risk for HIV infection, other sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancy. Sharing nee-

dles of any kind puts people at risk for HIV, too—that includes body piercing, tattooing and injecting drugs (including steroids). Help your teen practice how to refuse drugs that people may try to give them.

If you are unsure whether your teen is sexually active, ask. You might start by saying, "I know some teens today are having sex. Do you know how I feel about teens being sexually active?" If your teen answers no, you can share your point of view. If your teen says yes, you can ask, "What do you think my feelings are?" Continue the conversation by asking your teen how he or she would handle situations where they may be pressured into having sex.

Obviously, as the parent of a teenager, you must decide what message to send your teen about sexuality, contraception and sexually transmitted diseases. As you decide what that message will be, remember most teens who are informed about sexuality issues tend to delay sexual activity longer than those teens who are not informed. And, difficult as it may be, your teen may not accept your values—he or she may already be sexually active. Setting aside your emotions and facing the reality that your teen's health *must* be protected can help you talk with your teen about this life-saving information.

## Teens need to know

- ✓ They always have the right to say no to sexual activity. Be assertive—no means NO.
- ✓ They have a responsibility to stay sober; they should be wary of dates that try to get them drunk or to use other drugs.
- ✓ They shouldn't leave a party with someone they don't know well.
- ✓ They should trust their feelings and intuition; if it feels wrong, it probably is.
- ✓ They should never force anyone to have sex or engage in sexual activity.
- ✓ They should never try to talk someone into having sex.
- ✓ Sex is not a game or contest.

(Source: American Medical Association)

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