



Family Health

How Do I Say This? Talking to Your Teens about Sensitive Health Issues

September 2007

It can be tough enough talking to your teenager. Add a subject like sex-related health issues, and it doesn't get any easier.

Dr. Andrea Marks, a specialist in adolescent medicine, has spent years refining communication techniques with her patients that parents can benefit from.

“First, give yourself a break. Know that you're not the first and you won't be the last parent to come to these kinds of talks with some trepidation,” says Dr. Marks. “Second, know there's not ‘one right way’ to do it. You need to find what works for you and how you relate to your teen. Third, know that the toughest words are typically the first words. Be prepared, know how to open, and you'll be on your way.”

Dr. Marks gives the example of urinary tract infections (UTIs), or what she likes to call, “the next big talk,” after the birds and bees. She has these tips to help you talk to your daughter about UTIs:

Broach it Broadly: Start by talking about general hygiene, especially hygiene of the genital area. Stress that it's important to cleanse the genital area every day in the shower or bath, and to wipe from front to back after going to the bathroom.

Respect Her Maturity: Discussion of UTIs and symptoms can be included in any chat about emerging sexuality. Give her credit for what she likely knows, and make sure your teen knows that she must always visit a doctor if she suspects something is wrong. When it comes to UTIs, be sure to stress that only a doctor can prescribe an antibiotic to cure the infection. If left untreated, a UTI initially limited to the bladder can develop into a much more serious kidney infection. Most important, let her know she can always talk to you.

Follow Her Lead: A UTI “first talk” can take place after your teen tells you she's worried that she is urinating too often, that urination is painful, and that she has irritation in her genital area. If you suspect any of these symptoms, you can open the dialogue using your concern to bridge to the facts. Know what kinds of products can provide urinary pain relief so you can help her quickly. “Widely-available, urinary-specific OTC pain relievers like AZO Standard® can work in as little as 20 minutes,” says Dr. Marks. In general, all-purpose pain relievers are not as effective for treatment of UTI-specific pain and therefore, not recommended, she said.

Once you've opened the lines of communication, keep them open. “A good time to chat is while driving together in a car, or when your child is in bed at night. Sometimes not having to make eye contact can help conversation flow,” she said.

More of Dr. Marks's tips on discussing UTIs and other sensitive health issues are available at www.utifacts.com/nextbigtalk