

HIV/AIDS FACT SHEET

What to Tell Your Kids About HIV and AIDS

Children can be affected by HIV and AIDS at any age. Teenagers may put themselves at risk – or have friends they are concerned about. And younger children may have heard about it on television or from their friends, and wonder what it means to them.

What you should tell them depends on their age and activities, experience and interest. Sexually active 16 year olds and curious eight year olds both need information, but they won't want to know the same things. Their outlook will differ, too: while younger children may be afraid of AIDS, teens and older children often see themselves as invulnerable.

It also depends how much they already know. Do they have health or family life classes at school? Human sexuality education should be part of the curriculum from Kindergarten to the end of high school. They should be learning about HIV and AIDS prevention, but you can't assume they are. Ask them what is being taught – or ask the school what resources are being used.

What should children know at various ages? Here are some suggestions:

Young Children (5 – 8 years)

Children this age have likely heard about AIDS, and may have questions or fears about it. Reassure them. Let them know they shouldn't worry about getting AIDS. Explain that AIDS is a sickness caused by a kind of germ, or virus, carried in some people's blood. But it's not like a cold. It's now easy to catch. Try to find out what they already know, and explain that people with HIV/AIDS need compassion and friendship. At this – or any – age, dispel and myths they may have picked up. (No, it's not spread by mosquito bites or toilet seats, drinking fountains or swimming pools. And you can't get sick just by being around somebody with AIDS.)

Pre-teens (9 – 12 years)

With the changes of puberty, pre-teens start becoming more concerned about their bodies and their looks. Parents need to talk to them about sexuality, AIDS and drugs. Give them accurate information, using the correct words for different parts of the body.

Tell them what is meant by sexual intercourse, how HIV is spread, how to avoid risky behaviours and why taking drugs is dangerous. Pre-teens are old enough to understand what AIDS stands for: Acquire Immunodeficiency Syndrome. And what it means: that the cells that fight infections are not working. It is a serious, incurable disease – but it can be prevented.

Whether their risk of infection seems slight or significant, children and teenagers need to know about HIV and AIDS. By providing accurate information, you can satisfy their curiosity, reduce their fears, and help them to protect themselves.

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Teenagers (13 – 19 years)

This age group needs far more information, and in far more detail. Teenagers need to know that the best way to prevent HIV and AIDS is to avoid sexual intercourse and injection drug use. But they need to know about condoms and birth control, too, and how drugs and alcohol can affect their judgment. Tell them about the high risk of sharing needles for injecting drugs, including steroids, or for piercing or tattoos. Make sure they understand that AIDS is not just a disease that affects gay men.

For conversation openers, try these:

- Ask your children what they've learned about AIDS at school, or if they ever think about it.
- Tell them about an article you've read or news report you heard.
- Leave a book or magazine article on HIV or AIDS around the house for them to read.

Listen carefully to what they say – and don't worry if you don't have all the answers. You can find out more about HIV/AIDS at your local library or health unit.

Source: Canadian Public Health Association, 1997.
1997/1998 National AIDS Awareness Campaign Resource Guide.

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