

How to Talk About Sexual Health with Healthcare Providers

Communication between patients/clients and healthcare providers (e.g., physician, nurse) is important and may improve sexual health. Effective communication between patients/clients and healthcare providers has been linked to increased use of condoms, whereas lack of communication about sex is a risk factor for HIV and STI (sexually transmitted infections).¹ Some patients/clients may assume that their healthcare provider will tell them what they need to know, while healthcare providers may feel that their patients/clients' sexual lives are too personal to ask about.

Communication about sexual health is a complex matter influenced by many factors. Both patients/clients and healthcare providers may find it difficult to discuss sexuality and sexual health issues for a number of reasons, including:

- Discomfort for one or both people in talking openly about sexual issues
- A lack of, or out-dated sexual health knowledge and information
 - For many people, their own sexual health education may have happened a long time ago, if at all
 - Many healthcare providers receive little or no formal education and training in sexual issues
 - Some healthcare providers may feel they have no treatments to offer and are therefore unable to help with sexual issues
- Negative feelings and beliefs related to chronic illnesses, sexuality, aging, and/or life changes
- Fear of offending the other person, especially someone who is in a position of trust/power or someone who is vulnerable
- Feelings of time constraint for one or both people
- Not being sure of where to start the conversation, how to continue it, and/or how to end it

Ideas for Patients/Clients

- **Plan Before You Go**
 - Think about what you'd like to ask, and see if you can put it in a question that is one or two sentences.
 - It may be helpful to write a short list and bring it with you to appointments.
 - Practicing asking the questions in front of a mirror or in your head may also be useful.
- **Talk To Friends**
 - If you are comfortable with this, talk to other people about your concerns. Only pick people you think will respect your privacy and can handle a serious conversation about sex.
 - Doing this can give you valuable information about other people's experience, and it also gives you practice on talking about your concerns.

- **Find out More Information**
 - If you have concerns, or are worried about a sexual matter, look up some information on your own first. You can bring what you've read in with you, or use your health professional to explain anything that may not be clear.
 - You can find reliable information on sexual health issues at the following websites (which also have useful links)
 - www.calgaryhealthregion.ca/programs/sexualhealth
 - www.cfsh.ca/
 - www.goaskalice.columbia.edu/
 - www.sexualityandu.ca/home_e.aspx
 - www.tascc.ca

- **Ask About Confidentiality**
 - Healthcare providers are required to keep communications with patients/clients confidential, but it doesn't mean they always will.
 - It's a good idea to ask your healthcare provider what their rules of confidentiality are, and to let them know that you want the conversation to be private, even if your healthcare provider also sees your partner or spouse as a patient.

- **Be Prepared for Their Discomfort**
 - We tend to project a lot of expectations on healthcare providers. But like anyone else, a healthcare provider may be uncomfortable talking about sex with you. This doesn't mean that you can't do it, and it doesn't mean that they can't be helpful to you. Being prepared for a little bit of awkwardness will guard against you backing out at the last minute.
 - Remember that a healthcare provider is human, too and they may have anxieties about discussing sexuality with patients/clients because of their need to maintain appropriate boundaries with their patients/clients or even because they have sexual issues themselves. Just make sure not to take it personally or as a judgment on you if a healthcare provider becomes uncomfortable.
 - Medical and nursing school courses on sexual anatomy and human sexuality are relatively recent and are not addressed in all programs. Don't take no for an answer, even if you have to ask your healthcare provider for a referral to someone who can answer your questions!

- **Involving Your Partner**
 - If you are in an intimate relationship, work on talking with your partner about sexual concerns and questions. Finding out information together may be helpful.
 - Consider going together to an appointment with your healthcare provider, so that one person can ask the questions and the other person can help remember the answers. It may be useful to have one person take notes.
 - It is important to let your healthcare provider know about any relevant information from your sexual past, as well as discuss the importance of your sexuality and sexual relationship.

- **Don't Be Dismissed**
 - Some healthcare providers may minimize your issues or dismiss them, but that's usually because they don't know how to help.
 - Most healthcare providers will be open and receptive to your comments and will be happy to learn of any new information, particularly if it is based on science and research.
 - If your healthcare provider avoids addressing your sexual problems, acknowledge that the subject is embarrassing for both of you, but make it clear that your sexuality is a basic part of you.

- **Conversation Starters**
 - A good way to start the conversation is on a positive note: "I was hoping that you might be able to help me with a concern (or question) I have."
 - Many find it helps to bring an article (or our book!) with them, starting the conversation with "I was reading this and wondered what you thought."

- **Be persistent**
 - If you don't get the response you want, don't feel badly about finding another healthcare provider who can help you with your sexual concerns.
 - Look in your local yellow pages or check with your local hospital or health center for referrals (in Alberta Health Services, phone 943-LINK).

Adapted from:
sexuality.about.com/od/talkingwithyourkids/tp/talkdoctor.htm
www.holisticwisdom.com/article_sex_talking_with_your_doctor.htm

To lower your risk of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI), use a condom every time you have sex.

Sexual Decision Making

- You have the right to choose to have sexual intercourse or not
- If you choose to have sex, be sure to protect yourself from pregnancy and STI.
- Talk to your partner about these choices before you have sex!

For More Information Call:

Sexual and Reproductive Health 403 955-6515
 Education/Health Promotion

