

Tips for Parents of Adolescents: Common Concerns

Adolescence is the time between childhood and adulthood that children go through many physical and emotional changes. Here is information from the American Academy of Pediatrics about common concerns during adolescence. Teen is used in this publication to refer to adolescents, teenagers, preteens, and tweens.

Dieting and Body Image

Many teens try extreme diets or exercise programs because they want their bodies to look like those of the models, singers, actors, or athletes they see in the media, or they have a misguided understanding of what is “healthy.” Be aware of any diet or exercise program your teen is following. Many diets are unhealthy for teens because they do not have the nutritional value that bodies need during puberty.

If you have questions about your teen’s nutritional needs, ask their doctor. If you are concerned about rapid weight loss or suspect your teen has an eating disorder, contact your teen’s doctor right away. Eating disorders like anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa can be very dangerous, and treating them promptly is critical for recovery.

If your teen wants to train with weights, they should check with their doctor, as well as a trainer, coach, or physical education teacher. Also, help create a positive self-image by praising teens for their strengths and not focusing on their appearance. Set a good example by making eating right and exercising a part of your daily routine. Avoid negative self-talk or dieting. At home, stock up on healthy snacks like fruit, raw vegetables, whole-grain crackers, and yogurt, and limit unhealthy snacks like candy, cookies, chips, and soda pop.

Dating and Sex

Teens are naturally curious about sex. This is completely normal and healthy. However, teens may be pressured into having sex too soon by their peers or the media. Talk with your teen to understand their feelings and views about sex. Start early, and provide them with access to accurate and appropriate information.

Talking With Your Teen About Sex

Making healthy decisions about sex is important. Before your teen becomes sexually active, make sure you discuss

- **Medical and physical risks.** Risks include unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) like gonorrhea, chlamydia, hepatitis B, syphilis, herpes, HIV (the virus that can cause AIDS), and HPV (human papillomavirus—the virus that can cause cancers of the mouth and throat, cervix, and genitals).
- **Emotional risks.** Teens who have sex before they are emotionally ready may regret the decision when they are older or may feel guilty, frightened, or ashamed from the experience. Your teen should ask themselves “Am I ready to have sex?” or “What will happen after I have sex?”
- **Promoting safer sex.** Anyone who is sexually active needs to be aware of how to prevent unplanned pregnancy as well as how to protect against STIs. Condoms should always be used along with a second method of contraception to prevent pregnancy and reduce the risk for STIs.
- **Setting limits.** Make sure your teen has thought about what their sexual limits are before dating begins. Help them understand the concept of consent and that they control whether they engage in sexual activity. Most importantly, let your teen know they can talk with you and their doctor about dating and relationships. Offer your guidance throughout this important stage in your teen’s life.
- **Sex positivity.** Talking about sex only in negative terms is not realistic or healthy. At best, it can cause a teen to tune out, and at worst, it can lead to shame and guilt about sex and may discourage your teen from coming to you with questions or concerns. When discussing risks, it is important to acknowledge that sex can be a positive part of a healthy relationship, when the relationship is mature, respectful, safe, and monogamous. Think about how to discuss sex in a positive way, while upholding your personal and family values.

Drug Use

Teens may try or use tobacco like vaping devices, e-cigarettes, or chewing tobacco, and alcohol, or other drugs, out of curiosity or to deal with peer pressure.

Help build self-confidence or self-esteem in your teen. Ask your teen about any concerns and problems they are facing, and help them learn how to deal with strong emotions and cope with stress in healthy ways. If you suspect your teen is using drugs, talk with your teen's doctor.

Note: If you or someone else in the household smokes, now is a good time to quit. Watching a parent struggle through quitting can be a powerful message for a teen who is thinking about starting. It also shows you care about your health as well as your teen's.

Alcohol Use

Alcohol is not only the most socially accepted drug in our society but also one of the most abused and destructive. Even small amounts of alcohol can impair judgment, provoke risky and violent behavior, and slow down reaction time. An intoxicated teen (or anyone else) behind the wheel of a car makes it a lethal weapon. Alcohol-related car crashes are the leading cause of death for teens and young adults aged 15 to 24 years.

Although it's illegal for people younger than 21 years to drink, we all know most teens are not strangers to alcohol. Many of them witness alcohol use throughout their childhood, and many begin alcohol use as teens. If you choose to use alcohol in your home, be aware of the example you are setting.

- Having a drink should never be shown as a way to cope with problems.
- Don't drink in unsafe conditions—for example, while driving the car, mowing the lawn, or using the stove.
- Don't encourage your teen to drink or to join you in drinking.
- Don't allow your children to drink alcohol before they reach the legal age, and teach them never ever to drink and drive.
- Never make jokes about getting drunk. Make sure your children understand that it is neither funny nor acceptable.
- Show your children there are many ways to have fun without alcohol. Happy occasions and special events don't have to include drinking.

Remember

Well-child visits (annual health supervision visits) are especially important during adolescence. Your teen's doctor will make sure your teen is on a healthy track and suggest necessary changes to get on track and how to stay on track.

For More Information

American Academy of Pediatrics
www.aap.org and www.HealthyChildren.org

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