

9 What should I tell my kids about HIV and AIDS?



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Talking about HIV and AIDS with your children may not be easy but, whether their present risk of infection seems slight or significant, they need to be informed. HIV/AIDS affects us all. By providing accurate information, you can address questions and curiosities, reduce fears, and help your children make healthier choices. By talking with your children about HIV/AIDS, you are showing them you care.

What should children know about HIV and AIDS at various ages?

Here are some suggestions:

- **Young children (5-8 years)** may have questions or fears about HIV/AIDS. Explain that it is an illness caused by a kind of germ carried in some people's blood. Let them know that it is not like a cold, though; HIV is not easy to catch. Use the correct words for different parts of the body.
- **Pre-teens (9-12 years)** are becoming more concerned with their bodies and their looks. Talk to them about sexuality, HIV/AIDS and alcohol and drug use. Give accurate information about HIV and the changes they can expect in their bodies.
 Explain:
 - how HIV is spread (see Question 5 "How do you get HIV? (or not get HIV?)")
 - what is meant by sexual intercourse; explain other sexual activities if they ask
 - why using alcohol or drugs may be dangerous (see Question 6 "Are there risks of getting HIV if I drink or use drugs?").
- **Teenagers (13-19 years)** frequently experiment with sex, drugs and alcohol. Tell them the surest way to prevent HIV is to avoid unprotected sexual intercourse and injection drug use. Talk about how using drugs and alcohol affects judgment.

They also need detailed information about:

- safer sex (see Question 11 "How can I have sex more safely?")
- how to talk about and use condoms and other protective barriers (see Question 15 "How do I talk about using condoms?")

- other birth control methods
- other sexually transmitted infections
- the risks involved in sharing needles for injecting drugs (including steroids), or for piercing or tattooing (see Question 7 “How do I know if tattooing or piercing will be safe?”).

Emphasize that anyone, anywhere who engages in risky behaviours can get HIV.

At any age, you can dispel myths your children may have picked up. For example, HIV is not spread through drinking fountains, toilet seats, swimming pools or mosquitoes. Make it clear that you can't get sick just by being around someone with HIV/AIDS. Explain that people with HIV/AIDS, like all of us, need friendship and understanding.

How can I start a conversation about HIV/AIDS?

Try these:

- ask your children what they have learned about HIV/AIDS at school
- tell them about an article you've read or news report you heard
- leave a book or magazine article on HIV/AIDS around the house for them to read, then talk to them about it.

Listen carefully to what they say and don't feel that you need to have all the answers. You can find out more about HIV/AIDS from your local library or health department.

For more information, contact your local AIDS service organization or health care practitioner.

For more copies of this fact sheet or other documents on HIV/AIDS, contact the Canadian HIV/AIDS Clearinghouse, 400-1565 Carling Avenue, Ottawa, ON K1Z 8R1
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