

Talking to Kids About AIDS

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What Adults Must Know

Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is a serious illness and a public health crisis that demands attention. The number of people affected continues to increase. Since reporting began in 1985, a total of 180 HIV infections and 54 AIDS cases have been reported in North Dakota. Individuals who are in their 20s represent the largest age group for HIV infections (39 percent), closely followed by those in their 30s (37 percent).

For years, many adults and young people have convinced themselves it could never happen to them. Stories about famous people such as Magic Johnson and Tommy Morrison have created an awareness that it **can** happen to anyone.

Some diseases can't be prevented, but AIDS is one we **can** prevent. It is extremely important for parents, teachers, clergy and other adults in contact with youth to provide honest, accurate information. One of the fastest growing populations of HIV positive and AIDS victims is the teen and young adult category. While people are working hard to assist our youth in abstaining from sexual activity, many choose to be sexually active. These young people need the facts.

AIDS is the life-threatening disease caused by the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). The virus depresses the body's immune system, making it hard for the body to resist bacteria and viruses that might cause disease. The infected person is at high risk of diseases such as lung infection, pneumonia and cancer that result in death.

Knowing the facts about AIDS is necessary for individuals to choose healthy behaviors and attitudes.

The facts

- Anyone can acquire HIV. Anyone who engages in high-risk behavior with an infected person is likely to get the virus. You can't tell by looking if a person is infected.
- You **won't** get HIV through everyday contact with people in the workplace, at school, at the swimming pool or in any other casual situation.
- HIV is **not** passed in saliva, sweat, urine, bowel movements, tears, mosquito bites, clothes, phone receivers or toilet seats. It is **not** passed by donating blood, eating in restaurants or shaking hands.
- The virus **is** passed in blood, semen and vaginal fluids. It can enter the body through needle punctures, the rectum, vagina, penis, mouth or any cut or open sore. Anal intercourse is especially risky for both men and women because of the delicate tissues in which capillaries break and cause blood contact. HIV is in the blood, semen or vaginal secretions of an infected person. The two main ways of spreading HIV are having sex and using contaminated needles to inject drugs. In addition, infected women can pass HIV infection to their newborns.
- Other sexually-transmitted diseases (chlamydia, herpes, gonorrhea, syphilis) are also passed on by the same high-risk behavior.
- Abstinence is the only safe choice. Condoms are the best prevention for sexual transmission of HIV, but they aren't foolproof. Latex condoms provide the best protection, but any condom must be used properly and every time.
- AIDS is fatal.

How HIV Spreads

Sexual Contact

- Sex with someone who has had multiple sex partners or who won't openly discuss past sexual experiences.
- Unprotected sex (anal, vaginal or oral) with an infected person.
- Sex with someone who injects or has injected drugs.

Needles

- Using needles or syringes that were used by someone before.
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Safe Behavior

- Not having sex (abstaining)
- Not injecting drugs
- Sex with one steady, uninfected partner -- wait until you and your partner are committed to a relationship.

Children at different maturity levels handle AIDS information differently. You are the best judge of what to say and how much they can understand.

Ages 5 to 7

Children 5 and under have a difficult time understanding the difference between real and imaginary, while children 5 to 7 are beginning to separate real from imaginary. They learn best from experience. When confronted with a topic they do not know about or have not experienced, they may respond by being fearful.

Children 5 to 7 have many fears, and the best way to help your child is to provide reassurance and ask him or her to talk about fears. With AIDS receiving so much attention, it's possible your child is asking questions or is too afraid to ask questions. A child 5 to 7 is probably not ready for all the details, but a simple explanation is important. An example might be:

AIDS is a sickness caused by a certain type of germ called a virus. The virus is carried in some people's blood and body fluids. You can't get AIDS from touching someone or being around a person with AIDS like you can catch a cold from a friend. You can't get AIDS from being in the same school as someone with AIDS. You can't get it from pets, flowers, mosquitos, toilet seats, water glasses or hugs.

You may have heard that some children have AIDS. Some children may have been born with it because their mothers had it, or some got AIDS from blood transfusions. Now there are tests so donated blood with AIDS is not used and so people with AIDS can try to avoid giving it to anyone else.

*If you ever have questions or are afraid of anything else, please ask me. It helps to talk about fears to find out if they're real or imaginary. If your fears **are** real, it helps to learn what we can do to make concerns like AIDS less scary.*

You are healthy, and I'm going to help you stay healthy by teaching you to make smart choices.

Your children may ask questions you can't answer. That's OK. Don't be afraid to say you're not sure about an answer, but explain you will find out.

Ages 8 to 10

Between ages 8 and 10, children's fears change. They used to be afraid of monsters and other imaginary characters. Now they are more likely to be afraid that a real person might hurt them.

At this age, they are beginning to understand cause and effect -- for example, climbing in a tree might result in an injury. Most children 8 to 10 know death comes from an injury, illness or accident. Most have lost a pet or family member, and by age 10 they understand that all living things die.

While their understanding may increase, their fear doesn't necessarily decrease. They may talk about fears less openly now, so it's

important for an adult to look for an opportunity to bring up topics that might be bothering them.

The media emphasis on AIDS might increase your child's fear level and provide one of those "teachable moments." Children need to be encouraged to talk about their feelings. Some fears just need to be talked about, such as a child telling you he or she was embarrassed by an event. Some fears require action, such as a fear of not having friends. You might need to ease this fear by getting your child involved in a nonjudgmental group experience to learn some social skills and make a new friend.

There's hardly a child 8 to 10 who hasn't heard about AIDS. The media attention puts parents in an awkward situation where there's a need to discuss AIDS but a basic discussion about sex may be needed first. An example of what you could share with your child about AIDS is:

AIDS is a sickness you can get from a certain virus. AIDS stands for Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome. That's a fancy way of saying the army of cells that fight sicknesses is not working. The virus destroys the cells needed to defend a person from illness, so the person gets very sick.

When people find out this bad virus is in their bodies, they are said to be "HIV positive." Eventually, the virus may turn into AIDS. AIDS refers to a whole set of infections and diseases.

People are worried about AIDS because there's no cure for it. You can't get a shot to prevent it like measles. AIDS will most likely cause that person to die.

You can get HIV from the blood of an infected person by sharing a needle for shooting steroids or other drugs, and from sexual intercourse. The virus is in the fluids that come out during sex such as semen and vaginal fluids.

*You **cannot** get HIV from urine, feces, mosquitos or pets. You also **cannot** get it from hugging, eating from the same plate or glass as an infected person, or being in school with an infected person.*

You should treat a child or adult with AIDS just as nicely as you would anyone else.

Many people used to think only gay people got AIDS. Being gay is another word for homosexual which means boys are sexually attracted to boys and girls to girls. Being heterosexual means a boy and a girl are sexually attracted to each other.

*Today we know HIV can be passed in **any** sexual relationship. When people have sex with people they don't know, they are more likely to get the virus. That's one of the reasons why I don't want you to have sex until you are married or find the person you plan to marry.*

It is very important to make time to talk with children at this age. Your personal values must be related to your child since this is the age values are learned. If you wait until high school, it is often too late.

Good information taught in a secure environment such as the family is the best protection you can give your children as they go out into the world. Tell them you love them and want them to share their thoughts and feelings with you.

Ages 11 to 14

This age group varies in maturity level. You are the best judge of how much to say about sexuality and AIDS, but don't avoid the topic because you already talked about it once or gave your child a book. Pre-teens and teens need to hear your messages often. The ironic situation is that most of these kids have very little fear. In fact, they've entered the age where they usually believe, "It will never happen to me."

It can be very difficult to get them to realize this invincibility is not so. Magic Johnson, a role model for some children, said AIDS **can** happen to anyone since he is HIV positive. His announcement opened the eyes, ears and minds of young people and provided an opportune moment for parents and other adults to convey a critical message. The following information is an example of what can be shared with this age group:

AIDS stands for Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome. AIDS cripples the body's normal ability to fight invading germs and infections. AIDS refers to a whole set of infections and diseases. The Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) destroys the body's disease-fighting cells. A lot of other viruses and germs can then attack people. There's no vaccine or cure. AIDS is fatal.

You can get HIV by being involved in high-risk behaviors such as sexual intercourse with an infected person. The virus is carried in semen and vaginal fluids. These fluids come out during sex and are passed to the other person. You cannot destroy the virus by washing after sex. You can wear a condom during sex to prevent the fluids from contacting the other person; however, a condom is not foolproof. The only way to significantly reduce your chance of getting AIDS is to avoid

having sex -- abstaining. But if you do choose the risky behavior of pre-marital sex, the safest decision is to wait until you are confident your partner is monogamous (having sexual relationships only with you) and you decide this is the person you plan to marry.

You can also get HIV by sharing needles for drugs, tattoos or ear piercing since it is carried in the blood. Newborn babies can get the virus from their moms. It's very rare to get it from blood transfusions since blood is now screened for the virus. However, a few years ago blood was not tested as carefully and some people who are ill today contracted the virus from a transfusion years ago.

*The only way you can get HIV from kissing is if **both** partners have bleeding sores or gums and an exchange of infected blood takes place. Remember that even brushing teeth can bring blood to the surface.*

There's also a very slight chance of getting the virus from a stranger who may be injured or bleeding. With first aid, use a barrier such as gloves between you and the bleeding victim, being careful not to get blood on yourself. Call a medical professional quickly.

You cannot get HIV from being in casual contact with an infected person, hugging, sitting next to an infected person, using plates or glasses of an infected person, drinking from a water fountain, being coughed on, or swimming or wrestling with an infected person. Experts know this because they have checked families where there is a child who got the virus in a transfusion and none of the other family members got it.

Ages 15 to 18

Parents and concerned adults are often worried about the sexual decisions of 15- to 18-year-olds. It's important to understand that AIDS is not a "gay disease." Homosexuals and heterosexuals can both be infected. Parents worry about AIDS and other sexually-transmitted diseases as well as an unwanted pregnancy.

The 15- and 18-year-olds are under tremendous pressure to be sexually active from media, peers, the individual with whom they are involved and maybe even their own hormones or curiosity. One of the best prevention tools is your open and honest communication. In addition to the information appropriate for 11- to 14-year-olds, these comments may be helpful to older teens:

*The best way to avoid getting HIV or **any** sexually-transmitted disease is to avoid intercourse. I prefer that you have no intercourse before marriage. It is safest to abstain until you find the person you plan to marry and you are confident of his or her past. I want you to enjoy sex in a loving relationship, and I don't want you to take chances that can expose you to HIV or an unwanted pregnancy.*

When you care about someone, you may feel a lot of pressure to do what he or she wants you to do. But think about it -- If someone really cares, would they want you to risk your future? Or, are they only interested in meeting their own needs? It's hard to say no -- but it's harder to deal with pregnancy or disease. Young people are the fastest-growing population of people with sexually-transmitted disease today.

*The problem with intercourse at an early age is that **rarely** do you end up marrying this person. The more partners you are exposed to, the more likely you are to contract a STD such as AIDS. The effect is as if you are having sex not just with one person but with all the people that person has ever had sex with before.*

*It is **your** responsibility to abstain from sex or ask the sensitive but important questions about past sex and drug experiences. If you know someone well enough to have sex, you should be able to talk about AIDS. If someone is unwilling to talk, you should not have sex. If you think someone might be lying about being infected, don't have sex. Love and sex are not the same thing.*

If you do decide to become sexually active, condoms can reduce the risk but are not 100 percent effective.

The best way to avoid HIV and AIDS is to refrain from the high-risk factors. I hope you will be able to talk to me if you have questions. I will always love you no matter what, and I want you to make healthy decisions now so your future will be healthy, too.

Additional Sources of AIDS Information

- North Dakota AIDS Hotline (N.D. Dept. of Health and Consolidated Laboratories) 1-800-472-2180
- National AIDS Hotline (Centers for Disease Control) 1-800-342-AIDS
- Parent Line 1-800-258-0808
- Physicians, nurses or other health practitioners

- State or local health departments
 - Local chapters of the American Red Cross
 - Libraries
 - School counselors
 - Health teachers
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References

- Excerpts adapted with permission from The Parents in Touch Project (for better parenting and prevention of alcohol and other drug abuse, premature sexual activity and AIDS), copyright 1991, Joanne Koch and Lewis Koch, Evanston, IL 60202
 - Surgeon General's Report to the American Public on HIV Infection and AIDS, 1993
 - Understanding AIDS, Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Disease Control
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