

How to talk to your partner about STDs

By Julia Haskins

There's no getting around it: Having a sexual relationship means that you'll need to talk about sexually transmitted diseases. If you've been hesitant about having a conversation with your partner, you're not alone. Many people feel nervous discussing STDs, whether out of fear, embarrassment or just plain uncertainty about what to say.

Even if you don't know exactly how to go about it, talking about STDs doesn't have to be a source of anxiety for you or your partner. Here's how to get started.

Before talking to your partner, speak with your doctor about getting an STD test so that you know your health status and risks. And once you know your own status, don't hold off on discussing STDs — it's best to have this conversation before you have sex with a partner, says Julia Bennett, MPH, director of learning strategy for education at the Planned Parenthood Federation of America. That way, you can enjoy a healthy sexual experience



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compassionate. Disclosing an STD is a sign of trust and shows that your partner wants you to be healthy too. It's important to be respectful, because your partner might be embarrassed about having an STD.

"There's a lot of shame and stigma out in the world around having an STD, so it's really important to keep in mind that having an STD doesn't make you dirty or a bad person (and) that STDs are really common," Bennett says.

If your partner does disclose an STD, that doesn't mean that you both can't enjoy a healthy sex life. What it does mean is that you will both need to figure out how to have safe sex.

For example, you may need to talk about what form of protection will be most effective against STD transmission, or how often both you and your partner will need to be tested. Discuss a plan that each of you will follow to ensure that you're both safe.

If you or your partner has an STD that doesn't always have visible symptoms, such as HPV, chlamydia, gonorrhea or herpes, it's all the more urgent that you are regularly being tested and communicating with your partner. Talk to your doctor about what tests you need and how often you should receive them.

Not everyone is comfortable getting tested for STDs, which may be the case with your partner. If she or he has not been tested for an STD, ask why without showing any criticism or judgment. It may be that your partner has some unfounded fears about what it's like to get tested that you can help to correct.

She notes that your partner may also be scared of the results. But the sooner you know if you have an STD, the sooner you can get treated and talk about how you'll move forward.

It can also be helpful to talk about your own experience getting tested for STDs, Bennett says. Or, why not suggest getting tested together? You can support your partner and you'll both see there's nothing to fear when you're armed with information.

without worrying about risks.

Having a plan in place can help make the conversation easier. Think about what you want to say and what you need to know from your partner. One way to kick things off is to talk about your most recent STD test and ask if your partner has recently received one, Planned Parenthood suggests.

Besides determining whether either of you currently has an STD, you'll also want to consider what kind of contraception you'll use and if either of you is having sex with other people, which will affect how often each of you should be tested for STDs. It's critical that both of you know what to expect and how you will stay safe, no matter the sexual activity.

This conversation doesn't have to be overly formal or complicated. Just be upfront when letting your partner know that before you have sex, you want to know what you're each dealing with and take steps to stay safe.

"Be direct and really emphasize why you want to have safer sex, why you want to get tested and why you want to talk about STDs," Bennett says.

If you approach the conversation with openness and a relaxed attitude, it will ease any tension that you and your partner may feel discussing sexual health. You and your partner should be able to have this discussion without any fear of judgment.

There's no reason to panic if you or your partner discloses an STD. Above all, be

Let's talk!

Play it safe

Starting the conversation

Still not sure what to say? Finding the right words doesn't have to be hard. Here are a few talking points you can use for your conversation:

- ◆ Let's make sure we're both protected.
- ◆ Do you know if you have any STDs?
- ◆ How often do you use protection?
- ◆ Do you have any other sexual partners?
- ◆ When's the last time you had an STD test?
- ◆ We can enjoy sex more if we know it's safe.
- ◆ I want you to get tested because your health is important to me.
- ◆ Let's get tested together.



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