



Pick Your Path to Health

Talking to Your Partner About Sexual History: Tips to Keep it Honest and Light

In a time when a sexually transmitted disease could cause irreversible harm, or worse, death, it is imperative to know as much as you can about your partner's sexual history. Talking about past loves and relationships can be hard, but if you approach it thoughtfully, you can have a really productive discussion that will bring you closer and keep you safe.

The Facts

Knowing the facts about your partner and about sexually transmitted diseases is the first step. Sexually transmitted diseases are infectious diseases that spread from person to person through direct body contact or through infected body fluids, usually during sexual contact. According to the American Social Health Association, at least one in four Americans will get a sexually transmitted disease, including chlamydia, genital herpes, gonorrhea, syphilis, and HIV/AIDS.

The Symptoms

All sexually transmitted diseases are treatable, but not all are curable; some don't even have obvious or noticeable symptoms. According to Dr. Robert Johnson of the University of Medicine & Dentistry in Newark, an infection can happen immediately when a person has sex, but symptoms can occur months later or not at all.

With gonorrhea, symptoms can occur in three or four days; with chlamydia and herpes, in two weeks to a month; and with the human papilloma virus, which produces vaginal warts, a female may not notice the symptoms at all, Dr. Johnson explained. With herpes, the sores will come and go, but you will always have the disease. So, even when there are no symptoms or the symptoms go away, a person can still transmit the disease, he said.

Your Protection

The saying is really true: when you sleep with someone, you sleep with each of that person's partners. Just because they don't show symptoms of a sexually transmitted disease doesn't mean they are clean, and they can pass whatever they have been exposed to on to you.

That's why, for your own protection, it is important to abstain from sex, have sex with a mutually faithful, uninfected partner, or use protection to stay healthy. And if you're going to be sexually active, you owe it to yourself to find out whether your partner has ever had a sexually transmitted disease or has been with someone who did. If so, what disease was it and what was the treatment received? Those questions are the building blocks of a sexual history.

Having the Talk

Now that you know the facts about sexually transmitted diseases, it is time to find out the facts about your partner's sexual history. How you approach the topic and what attitude you have during the conversation will help determine your partner's reaction and whether or not you find out what you need to know. Think ahead of time about what you're going to say and how you're going to say it. If you have a plan for the conversation, it will make it a lot more comfortable for both of you.

One of the most difficult things about having the discussion is deciding how to start it. One noted sex expert suggests that you use a recent event to spur the conversation, instead of bringing it up out of the blue. "[You can say] I read it in a magazine and I really had some questions about what I heard and I want to talk with you about it, or I saw it on television, or overheard my friends talking about it and I want to know how you feel about it," suggests Gail E. Wyatt, Ph.D., psychologist and professor at the University of California in Los Angeles.

If you're nervous about broaching the subject of sexual history, first try playing out what you would say with a friend or relative. Also, suggests the Public Health Department for Seattle & King County Washington, you can set the scene with a cartoon from a brochure about sexually transmitted diseases, or even a music video or song.

The atmosphere of the conversation can make a real difference in how your partner reacts to the discussion-the last thing you want is for your partner to think that you are talking about this because of a lack of trust. Try to create an atmosphere of trust and concern, notes Dr. Wyatt. She suggests saying something similar to: "I know today we have to be very careful about our health, so why don't we both get tested and show each other the results, and let's talk about what that means to our relationship."

Where do I start?

Start by finding out as much as you can about sexually transmitted diseases and then think about the details of how you want to have the conversation with your partner. Here are some small steps to get you started:

- Ask your doctor about the different kinds of diseases. He or she may even have brochures or other information that you can take with you and read later. You can also call the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National STD and AIDS Hotline at 1-800-342-AIDS.
- Think about the right time to talk about it with your partner. Try to avoid situations like talking about it on a romantic date or while kissing. Don't start the conversation while you are drinking or listening to loud music.
- Find a neutral place to have the conversation. Choose a private place but not the bedroom or a car.
- Stay light-hearted during the discussion. You don't have to be too gloomy or serious, as long as you and your partner talk about things and find out about each other's history.

And, most importantly, while the conversation is going on, listen to what your partner has to say and be honest about your past and your feelings. Make sure that you find out everything you need to know to make an educated decision about your sexual relationship and your health. Remember, your health and your partner's health are at stake.

Make your sexual health a priority. It will put you on a path to better health.

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign or to request weekly health tips by e-mail, call 1-800-994-WOMAN or TDD at 1-888-220-5446 or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov>. This article was developed through a partnership between the Office on Women's Health and the Wellness Warriors Network.