

# teen health basics:

for parents



**Y**our teen is becoming more independent. What can you do to protect the health and safety of your teen as he or she grows?

Plenty. We've seen many children through their teen years, and we've created a basic checklist of things you can do to guide and nurture them during this time of change.

### **Above all**

Teens need their parents and care what their parents say and think (despite the way they may act to the contrary!)

- Be there: after school, at meal time, when they have friends over.
- Tell them you love them, often.
- When they mess up, teach them how to do better.
- Build trust. Know your rules and keep them consistent.

### **Body changes, body image and hormones**

Get ready! The teen years are a time of fast growth and many changes. The hormones that cause physical changes in girls and boys also make their moods and energy swing up and down.

- Listen to your child's concerns about their changing bodies and answer questions openly.
- Emphasize the good qualities of their unique shape and size. Show your teen you accept and love them at any shape or size.

### **Smoking**

We all want our kids to be tobacco free. What can parents do to help?

- Be a role model. If you smoke, seek help from your clinic to quit smoking.
- Make it a rule to not smoke in the house or car. Breathing someone else's smoke is very dangerous, especially for teens. Secondhand smoke can increase the number and severity of asthma attacks.
- Let your kids know you are concerned about their smoking.

## Drinking

- Talk to your teens about family rules related to drinking.
- Tell them about the law (legal age in Minnesota is 21) and the penalties for underage drinking (loss of driver's license, suspension from athletic teams).
- Emphasize never to drink and drive. Offer to pick them up from parties if they have been somewhere where there has been drinking (no matter what). Wait until the next day to ask questions.
- Talk to your teen about how drinking can cause people to make decisions that have significant consequences (like pregnancy or fatal car crashes).

## Other drugs

Most children have heard about drugs and are curious about how drugs affect people.

- Talk to your kids about your family's values and rules about drugs.
- Talk to them about the dangers.
- Signs that a child may be using drugs include: sleeping a lot, staying up very late, acting more moody than usual, or falling behind in school work. Your doctor would be happy to talk to you (and your teen) about drugs.

## Safety and driving

Make — and enforce — clear and consistent rules. A child should:

- Always wear a seat belt (parents can influence teen behavior by buckling up).
- Never drink and drive. Tell your children that they can call you any time for a ride if they're concerned about a driver's drinking or drug use.
- When they reach driving age, never let your child drive when he's short on sleep. It can be as dangerous as drunken driving.
- Always wear a helmet when biking, in-line skating, or skateboarding (make sure you wear a helmet, too).

- If there are any guns in your home, be sure they are unloaded and locked up. Check to see if there are guns in the homes at which your child spends time, and ask whether those guns are locked. Half of all homes contain guns.

## Depression

How is your child's spirit, energy level and mood? Do they seem down? Irritable? Are they eating more than usual — or not at all? Unfortunately, more teenagers are getting depressed these days — suicide attempts are a leading cause of injury and death for teens.

- Keep talking to your teen about how they are feeling and how their life is going.
- The best way to get teens to talk is to really listen.
- If you have concerns, we'll be glad to see you at your child's clinic. Depression is treatable.

## Nutrition

The teen years are a time of great growth and appetite spurts. Be ready for your teen to eat more and to become more independent about food decisions.

- Encourage your teen to eat breakfast by eating with them and providing easy, quick and healthy options.
- Have healthy food at home for them: fruit, veggies, juice, cereals, yogurt, milk.
- Strive for a family meal at least once a day. Keep it simple and make spending time together your main goal.
- Serve milk, water, or 100 percent fruit juice instead of soda pop at meals.
- Encourage your teen to participate in family meal preparation.



## Physical activity

Physical activity declines in adolescence. Most physical activity among young people occurs outside of the school day.

- Be a good role model. Set an example by doing active things as a family.
- Limit screen time (TV, videos, computer) to no more than two hours of leisure time each day.
- Set up your home as a fun hangout that supports physical activity. Invest in a volleyball net, basketball hoop, or hula hoops.
- Provide support for your teen. Make sure he has shoes, clothes and transportation in order to participate in various activities.



## Weight and dieting

- Create an environment of healthy food choices and opportunities for physical activity.
- Listen to your child's concerns about body weight and help them to understand how unrealistic the shapes of models are in our culture.
- Look for signs of inappropriate dieting behavior (smoking, diet pills, laxatives, fad diets, radical changes in eating behavior), and discuss your concerns with your teen.
- Don't put your child on a diet.
- Don't talk about your personal desire to be thin or your latest diet.
- Don't treat your overweight child differently than others in the family.

## Friendships, relationships and dating

- Get to know your child's friends. Offer your teen the opportunity to invite friends to your home.
- Know where your child is. Call parents who are hosting your child at their house and find out if their rules are the same as yours.

## Sex & sexuality

As children enter grades five and six (and sometimes sooner), they begin to have puberty changes, they also start to get more curious about sex.

- Many TV shows and magazines they see have material about sex. This is a good time to start talking with your teen about sex and what your values are.
- Your child might have questions about changes in her body and sex. The best way to answer is to be as honest and direct as you can and give the best information that you have.
- We have information at our clinic about talking with teens about sex.

## Videos, TV and computers

Teens often spend a lot of time in front of TV and computer screens.

- Set a daily time limit on screen exposure of all kinds, so there is time to do homework and get physical activity.
- Set limits about what kinds of shows are allowed, what kind of electronic games are played, and which Web sites can be visited. Censor content that is violent.
- Remove TVs from bedrooms. Children with TVs in their rooms do not do as well in school, participate in fewer family activities, and watch five hours more TV every week than children who don't have TVs in their rooms.

By mid-adolescence, children have watched 15,000 hours of TV  
— more time than spent with teachers, friends or parents.

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