

A PARENT BRIEF

Supporting Your Son's Sexual and Reproductive Health

As a parent, it's important to understand and help your son navigate his sexual and reproductive health. Usually, these issues first become relevant during the early adolescent years, ages 11-14, usually synonymous with the middle school years. Parents' availability and guidance are encouraged through your son's early adulthood. Here are some key points and advice to help you be a strong advocate for him.

Understanding the Challenges

Young males often face difficulties in getting appropriate healthcare for sexual and reproductive health, including what to expect during puberty, correct and consistent condom use, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and many others. Many healthcare providers rarely discuss these important issues at a time when they become the most important. Parents should advocate for their son's reproductive healthcare with his medical provider.

Key Factors for Better Healthcare

Once boys enter adolescence, it is common practice for medical providers to see their patients apart from their parents to empower and encourage them to start taking responsibility for their own healthcare. This is especially true for sexual and reproductive healthcare.

One-on-One time with Providers allows your son to have trusted, confidential conversations about their sexual health and any sexual risk behaviors that he may be engaging in. These one-on-one conversations ensure that your son is comfortable talking about issues he may not discuss otherwise and allows for the provider to counsel and guide the patient accordingly.

Recognizing Risk Behaviors

Several behaviors increase the risk of STIs if your son is sexually active:

- Inconsistent and incorrect condom use
- Having multiple sexual partners
- Using drugs or alcohol prior to sexual intercourse

Importance of Routine Screening

Both the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Society for Adolescent Health & Medicine recommend routinely asking their patients about sexual and reproductive health to assess any concerns or risks there may be. Despite these recommendations, boys are less likely to be assessed despite being equally at risk for STIs and other reproductive health issues. As such, parents should encourage their son to get screened regularly for STIs, including gonorrhea, chlamydia, and syphilis. This is especially true if he is sexually active and has any concerns such as pain with urination or a discharge from his penis.

Understanding STIs

Chlamydia and Gonorrhea. These are the most common infections. Often asymptomatic; symptoms can include discharge

and pain during urination. Specific urine screens for these infections are accurate.

Syphilis. Early signs include painless ulcers; later stages may present as a full body rash, that characteristically includes the palms and soles. Typically, this infection is tested by a blood test.

Herpes. Symptoms include fluid-filled blisters on the genitals or surrounding areas. The best test is a swab of the blisters. Testing without symptoms is not recommended.

Human Papilloma Virus (HPV). Most strains do not show any signs. Two strains cause warts. Vaccination is crucial to prevent strains that can cause cancer. There is no HPV test for males.

HIV. HIV is usually asymptomatic for years. Routine testing is key. There are many ways to prevent HIV infections such as using condoms correctly and consistently, and post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) and preexposure prophylaxis (PrEP) for young men who have sex with men.

Special Considerations

For males who have sex with males, practices like rectal douching before anal sex also increase risks. Sexual health education, routine testing for STIs and HIV and using PrEP are key to staying healthy and free from infections.

Practical Advice for Parents

Encourage Communication and start early and talk often. The earlier these conversations are started the easier they are as your son gets older. Talk openly with your son about sexual health and the importance of safe practices such as correct and consistent condom use. Encourage him to have similar conversations with his healthcare provider.

Promote Safe Practices. Talk with your son about the importance of always using a condom and limiting the number of sexual partners. Relatedly, talk with him about the dangers of using drugs and alcohol.

Support Vaccination. Advocate for the HPV vaccine and ensure your son receives it before age 15.

Routine Checkups. Encourage annual STI screenings and make sure he knows the importance of these checkups.

Ensure that his healthcare provider is comfortable and knowledgeable about all the current STI and HIV prevention strategies.

Being Proactive

By understanding these points and being an advocate for your son, you can help him make informed decisions about his sexual and reproductive health, reducing his risk of STIs and supporting his overall wellbeing.

