

HIV PREVENTION TOOLKIT FOR YOUNG WOMEN

SMART SEX: CONTEXT AND COMMUNICATION



Communication

After knowledge, good communication skills are probably the single most important tool in a young woman's HIV¹ prevention toolkit. Being able to **talk** about what one wants and needs is a huge part of actually **getting** what they want and need. (This is true of all things, not just sex.)

For most people it's hard at first. But the stress of worrying about a conversation is usually a far bigger deal than actually having the conversation. And it does get easier with practice, because people get better at it. Ultimately, good honest communication contributes to a relationship rather than detracting from it.

Some communication tips:

- ➔ Prepare for conversations that might be difficult. Practice ahead of time, write down the main points, or role-play with a friend.
- ➔ Timing is important. It's best not to have important conversations about sex when naked or under the influence of drugs or alcohol.
- ➔ Use "I" statements (e.g. "I think..." and "I want..."), which tend to be strong, respectful, self-assertive and less threatening to the other person.
- ➔ Speak and listen honestly and openly.

Good sexual communication means creating and maintaining an environment in which partners can talk openly about sex – in and out of bed – even when what needs to be said isn't sexy or isn't what the other person might want to hear.

¹ HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus, a virus that attacks the immune system and results in a chronic, progressive illness which makes people vulnerable to other potentially serious infections and cancers. (AIDS, which stands for Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome, is the advanced stage of HIV infection.)

- ➔ Don't be afraid of the truth – either telling it or hearing it.
- ➔ On the other hand, if fear of personal safety is a concern, the conversation should take place in a semi-public place, or with a supportive third person present.
- ➔ It is important to remember that communication is not just a conversation; it's an on-going process. Like any other skill, communication skills improve with practice.

A word about words

Sometimes it's hard to communicate about sex because it's not clear which words to use for specific body parts or sexual activities. Some words might seem right for talking to a doctor, but not for talking to a sexual partner, or vice versa. Sometimes when the words feel awkward, there is a tendency to avoid the topic altogether. The solution is to talk more about sex, not less!

Consent is super important

Saying Yes

- ➔ Everyone has the right to a safe and pleasurable sex life. When someone wants to have sex and is ready for it, they give their enthusiastic consent in words and with body language.
- ➔ Especially with a new partner or a new sexual activity, explicit verbal consent is a really, really good idea, and a best practice.
- ➔ What does enthusiastic consent look like? In addition to verbal consent (like "yes," "don't stop," or "that feels good") consenting partners meet halfway, respond to touch, touch back, make approving noises, position their body helpfully, make occasional eye contact, smile, kiss, lean in.

Saying No

- ➔ Everybody has the right to say no to sex with anybody at any time.
- ➔ Everybody has the right to say no to any sexual activity, even if they've consented to the same activity in the past with the same partner or with somebody else.
- ➔ Everybody has the right to say no to any sexual activity even if they're consenting to a different sexual activity with that same person.
- ➔ Everybody has the right to say no to sexual activity, even if they are – or seem to be – sexually aroused.
- ➔ Everybody has the right to say no to any person, no matter what their relationship is, including marriage.
- ➔ Even after consent is given for a sexual activity, everybody has the right to change their mind and withdraw consent.

Consensual sex is when everybody in a sexual encounter genuinely wants to participate and nobody needs to be pressured, manipulated, tricked or forced into participating. Without consent, sex is a crime.

- ➔ Saying no does not need a convincing reason. Not wanting to do something is an excellent reason not to do it.
- ➔ What does non-consent look like? A non-consenting partner says things like “I don’t know,” “I’m not sure,” “Wait,” “Stop,” or “No.” They might pull away, flinch, go limp, freeze, become silent, look unhappy or scared, start holding their breath, or go from meeting halfway to merely allowing touch. If there’s any doubt, the sexual activity should stop and partners should check in with one another verbally.

Saying Maybe

There is no room for ambiguity in consent, so there is no maybe. Only yes is consent. Saying maybe is the same as saying no: it means STOP.

Consent is a two-way street

Consent is about everyone in a possible sexual interaction. Make sure all partners are enthusiastically consenting.

Negotiating sex

One can negotiate the time, place, pacing, kind of sex, use of safer sex practices, birth control methods, all kinds of things.

Here are some examples:

- ➔ “This feels good and I want to keep going, but sex without a condom isn’t an option for me. You can wear one, or I can wear an internal one, or we can do something else that doesn’t involve any body fluids.”
- ➔ “Yeah, I understand it feels better without a condom. Let’s talk about what it would take for us to be able to have sex together without a condom.”
- ➔ “I do trust you. I just trust you more with a condom on.”
- ➔ “It feels better for me with a condom, because then I can just relax and get into it.”
- ➔ “I’d like to take this further, but not while I’m so high. What are you doing tomorrow?”
- ➔ “Sex sounds good to me too, but I don’t want to do it at a party. Let’s go someplace else.”
- ➔ “I want to slow things down a bit.”
- ➔ “I might be willing to try that another time, but I’m not into it right now.”
- ➔ “Since we don’t have any condoms, let’s play Dragon Age...or do you want to try frottage?”

There are circumstances under which sexual partners cannot legally give consent. For example, consent cannot be given by someone who is drunk or unconscious. Other factors, such as age or the nature of the relationship between the partners, can also invalidate consent. Sex with anyone under these circumstances is a crime, even when agreed to by the participants.²

² For more information, see Age of Consent to Sexual Activity: <http://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/other-autre/clp/faq.html>

The social context of risk

While young women in general are vulnerable to HIV¹ infection, some are more vulnerable than others.

Living with social factors such as these can increase a young woman's vulnerability to HIV:

- ➔ Poverty
- ➔ History of sexual, physical or emotional abuse
- ➔ Being in an abusive relationship
- ➔ Being homeless or street-involved
- ➔ Injection drug use
- ➔ Unsafe partying
- ➔ Identifying as transgender
- ➔ Involvement in survival sex work (sex in exchange for the necessities of life)
- ➔ Being an Aboriginal person (First Nations, Inuit or Métis)
- ➔ Experiencing racism, discrimination or stigma
- ➔ Experiencing mental health issues

When dealing with some of these other challenges, HIV might be just one risk among many on a given day, and prevention might not be one's most pressing priority. For example, if someone is living on the street and is offered a warm place to sleep in exchange for condomless sex, that's a very different problem than being at home with a partner who doesn't want to use a condom.

Young women in some of the most challenging circumstances need to be good at knowing, communicating about and practicing safer sex.

"Being culturally grounded, housed, well fed, educated, employed, economically stable, with a healthy childhood can minimize the risk of exposure to HIV."

– Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network

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