

# Talking with Children About AIDS

## What Adults Must Know

Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is a serious illness and a public health crisis that demands attention. The number of people affected continues to increase. By the end of 1991, 1,301 Oregonians had been diagnosed with AIDS and 838 had already died.

For years, many adults and young people have convinced themselves it could never happen to them, but the Magic Johnson story has created an awareness that it can happen to anyone.

Some diseases can't be prevented, but AIDS is one we can prevent. It is extremely important for parents, teachers, clergy and other adults in contact with youth to provide honest, accurate information. One of the fastest growing populations for HIV positive tests is the teen and young adult population. Many young people are sexually active and they need the facts.

AIDS is the life-threatening disease caused by the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV).

The virus depresses the body's immune system, making it hard for the body to resist bacteria and viruses that might cause disease.

The infected person is at high risk of diseases such as lung infection, pneumonia and cancer. Once developed, the full-blown syndrome of AIDS results in death.

Knowing the facts about AIDS is necessary for individuals to choose healthy behaviors and attitudes.

The facts are:

- Anyone can acquire the HIV virus. It is not a homosexual disease. Heterosexual people who engage in high-risk behavior with an infected person are likely to get the virus. You can't tell by looking if a person is infected.
- You won't get the HIV virus through contact with people in the workplace, at school, at the swimming pool or in any other casual situation.

The HIV virus is **not** passed in saliva, sweat, urine, bowel movements, tears, mosquito bites, clothes, phone receivers or toilet seats. It is **not** passed by donating blood, eating in restaurants or shaking hands.

- The virus is passed in semen, vaginal fluids and blood. It can enter the body through the vagina, penis, rectum, mouth or any cut or open sore. Engaging in anal intercourse is especially risky behavior due to the delicate tissue. The virus can be transmitted in blood transfusions, by exchange of semen or secretions during intercourse, from mother to fetus during pregnancy or birth, or by sharing needles or syringes with drug users.

Other sexually-transmitted diseases (gonorrhea, syphilis, herpes, chlamydia) are also passed on by risky sexual behavior.

- Abstinence is the only perfectly safe choice. Condoms are the best prevention for sexual transmission of the HIV virus, but they aren't foolproof. Latex condoms provide the best protection, but any condom must be used properly and every time. Nonoxinal 9 spermicide also decreases the chance of passing on the virus.
- AIDS is fatal.

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OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION SERVICE

Children at different maturity levels handle AIDS information differently. You are the best judge of what to say and how much they can understand.

### Ages 5 to 7

Children 5 and under can have a difficult time understanding the difference between what is real and imaginary, while children 5 to 7 are beginning to distinguish between the two. They learn best from experience. When confronted with a topic they do not know about or have not experienced, they may respond by being fearful.

Children 5 to 7 have many fears, and the best way to help your child is to provide reassurance and ask him or her to talk about fears. A child 5 to 7 is probably not ready for all the details about AIDS, but a simple explanation is important. An example might be:

*AIDS is a sickness caused by a specific kind of germ called a virus. The virus is carried in some people's blood and body fluids. You can't get AIDS from touching someone or being around a person with AIDS like you can catch a cold from a friend. You can't get AIDS from being in the same school as someone with AIDS. You can't get it from pets, flowers, mosquitoes, toilet seats, water glasses, or hugs.*

*You may have heard that some children have AIDS. Some children got AIDS from blood transfusions, or they may have been born with it because their mothers had it. Now there are tests so donated blood with AIDS is not used and so people who have the virus won't infect someone else.*

*If you ever have questions, please ask me. It helps to talk about fears to find out if they're real or imaginary. It helps to learn what we can do to make concerns like AIDS less scary.*

*You are healthy, and I'm going to help you stay healthy by teaching you to make smart choices.*

Your children may ask questions you can't answer. That's okay. AIDS is a topic with many unanswered questions even though we know much more now than we did a few years ago. Don't be afraid to say you're not sure about an answer but explain you will find out.

### Ages 8 to 10

Between ages 8 and 10, children's fears change. They used to be afraid of monsters and other imaginary characters. Now they are more likely to be afraid that a real person might hurt them.

At this age, they are beginning to understand cause and effect. For example, climbing in a tree might result in an injury. Most children 8 to 10 know death comes from an injury, illness, or accident. Many have lost a pet or family member. Generally, they understand that all living things die.

While their understanding may increase, their fear doesn't necessarily decrease. They may talk about fears less openly now, so it's important for an adult to look for an opportunity to bring up topics that might be bothering them.

The media emphasis on AIDS might increase your child's fear level and provide one of those "teachable moments." Children need to be encouraged to talk about their feelings.

There's hardly a child 8 to 10 who hasn't heard about AIDS. The

#### High-Risk Behavior

- Sex with someone who has had several sex partners or who won't openly discuss past sexual experiences
- Unprotected sex (without a condom) with an infected person
- Sex with someone who injects drugs
- Sharing drug needles and syringes

#### Safe Behavior

- Not having sex (abstaining)
- Not injecting drugs
- Sex with a faithful, uninfected partner

The media attention puts parents in an awkward situation where there's a need to discuss AIDS but a basic discussion about sex may be needed first. An example of what you could share with your child about AIDS is:

*AIDS is a sickness you can get from a certain virus. AIDS stands for Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome. That's a fancy way of saying the army of cells that fight sicknesses is not working. The virus destroys the cells needed to defend a person from illness, so the person gets very sick.*

*When people find out this bad virus is in their bodies, they are said to be "HIV positive." Eventually, the virus may turn into the full disease which is called AIDS.*

*People are worried about AIDS because there's no cure for it. You can't get a shot to prevent it like measles. People who get AIDS eventually die.*

*You can get the HIV virus from the blood of an infected person (such as through a blood transfusion or cuts and open sores), by sharing a needle for shooting drugs and from sexual intercourse. The virus is in the fluids that come out during sex such as semen and vaginal fluids.*

*You cannot get the HIV virus from urine, feces, mosquitoes, or pets. You also cannot get it from hugging, eating from the same plate or glass as an infected person, or being in school with an infected person.*

*You should treat a child or adult with AIDS just as nicely as you would anyone else.*

*Many people used to think only gay people can get AIDS. Being gay is another word for homosexual which means boys are sexually attracted to boys and girls to girls. Being heterosexual means a boy and a girl are sexually attracted to each other.*

*Today we know the HIV virus can be passed in any sexual relationship. When people have sex with people they don't know, they are more likely to get the virus. That's one of the reasons why I don't want you to have sex until you find the person you plan to marry or be with forever.*

*It is very important to make time to talk with children at this age. Your personal values must be related to your child since this is the age values are learned. If you wait until high school, it is often too late.*

*Good information taught in a secure environment such as the family is the best protection you can give your children as they go out into the world. Tell them you love them and want them to share their thoughts and feelings with you.*

## **Ages 11 to 14**

This age group varies in maturity level. You are the best judge of how much to say about sexuality and AIDS, but don't avoid the topic because you already talked about it once or gave your child a book. Pre-teens and teens need to hear your messages often. The ironic situation is that most of these children have very little fear. In fact, they've entered the age where they usually believe, "It will never happen to me."

It can be very difficult to get them to realize this invincibility is not so. Magic Johnson, a role model for some children, said AIDS can happen to anyone. His announcement that he is HIV positive opened the eyes, ears and minds of young people and is providing an opportunity for parents and other adults to convey a critical message. The following information is an example of what can be shared with this age group:

*AIDS stands for Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome. AIDS cripples the body's normal ability to fight invading germs and infections. AIDS refers to a whole set of infections and tumors which can't occur if the immune cells of the body are OK. The Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) destroys these disease-fighting cells. A lot of other viruses and germs can then attack people. There's no vaccine or cure. AIDS is fatal.*

*You can get the HIV virus by being involved in high-risk behaviors such as sexual intercourse with an infected person. The virus is carried in semen and vaginal fluids. These fluids come out during sex and are passed to the other person. You cannot destroy the virus by washing after sex. You can*

*wear a condom during sex to prevent the fluids from contacting the other person; however, a condom is not foolproof. The only way to significantly reduce your chance of getting AIDS is to avoid having sex – abstaining. But if you do choose the risky behavior of sex at an early age, you should be confident your partner is monogamous (having sexual relationships only with you).*

*You can also get the HIV virus by sharing needles for shooting drugs since it is carried in the blood. New-born babies can get the virus from their moms. It's very rare to get it from blood transfusions since blood is now screened for the virus. However, a few years ago blood was not tested as carefully and some people who are ill today contracted the virus from a transfusion years ago.*

*There's a slight possibility of getting the HIV virus from kissing; however, about 1 quart of saliva is needed to pass on the virus. The danger is much greater if there is an open sore in or around the mouth. There's also a very slight chance of getting the virus from a stranger who may be injured or bleeding. Take precautions with first aid and call a medical professional quickly.*

*You cannot get the HIV virus from being in casual contact with an infected person, hugging, sitting next to an infected person, using plates or glasses of an infected person, drinking from a water fountain, being coughed on, swimming or wrestling with an infected person. Experts know this because they have checked families where there is a child who got the virus in a transfusion and none of the other family members got it.*

**THIS PUBLICATION IS OUT OF DATE. For most current information, Oregon State Educational Catalog**

## Ages 15 to 18

Parents and concerned adults are often worried about the sexual decisions of 15- to 18-year-olds. It's important to understand that AIDS is not a "gay disease." Homosexuals and heterosexuals can both be infected. Parents worry about AIDS and other sexually-transmitted diseases as well as an unwanted pregnancy.

The 15- and 18-year-olds are under tremendous pressure to be sexually active from media, peers, the individual with whom they are involved and maybe even their own hormones or curiosity. One of the best prevention tools is your open and honest communication. In addition to the information appropriate for 11- to 14-year-olds, these comments may be helpful to older teens:

*The best way to avoid getting the HIV virus or any sexually-transmitted disease is to avoid intercourse. I prefer that you have no sex before marriage or a committed, mature relationship since you would be regretting if you didn't have sex until you found the person you plan to spend your life with and you are confident of his or her past. I want you to enjoy sex in a loving relationship, and I don't want*

*you to take chances that can expose you to the HIV virus or an unwanted pregnancy.*

*When you care about someone, you may feel a lot of pressure to do what he or she wants you to do. But think about it – if someone really cares, would that person want you to risk your future? Or, is she or he only interested in meeting personal needs? It's hard to say no – but it's harder to deal with pregnancy or disease. Young people are the fastest-growing population of sexually-transmitted disease (STD) victims today.*

*The more partners you are exposed to early, the more likely you are to contract a STD such as AIDS. The effect is as if you are having sex not just with one person but with all the people that person has ever had sex with before.*

*It is your responsibility to abstain from sex or ask the sensitive but important questions about past sex and drug experiences. If you know someone well enough to have sex, you should be able to talk about AIDS. If someone is unwilling to talk, you should not have sex. Love and sex are not the same thing.*

*If you do decide to become sexually active, condoms can reduce the risk, but are not 100 percent effective.*

*The best way to avoid the HIV virus and AIDS is to refrain from the high-risk factors. You're getting older, but you're not old enough to have all*

### Additional Sources of AIDS Information

Oregon AIDS Hotline  
1-800-777-AIDS

National AIDS Hotline (Centers for Disease Control) 1-800-342-AIDS

Facts & Feelings family-based sexuality education video series, Utah State University (available on free loan from the NDSU Extension Service Distribution Center, (701) 237-7883)

Physicians, nurses or other health practitioners

State or local health departments

Local chapters of the American Red Cross

Libraries

School counselors

*Building Community Support for Families of People with AIDS*, Oregon State University Extension publication EC 1372. To order, send 25¢ plus 50¢ shipping and handling to Agricultural Communications, Oregon State University, AdS 422, Corvallis, OR 97331-2119. For telephone orders and quotes on quantity orders, call (503) 737-2513.

*the answers. Neither am I. I hope you will be able to talk to me if you have questions. I will always love you no matter what, and I want you to make healthy decisions now so your future will be healthy, too.*



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