



“Doctor, Let’s Talk About It”

Discussing sexual health **by Alison Thomas-Cottingham, Ph.D.**

Have you ever left the deli with a sandwich covered in mayonnaise when you asked for none, or sat through a movie starring your least favorite actor because something failed in your attempts to communicate your preference? The consequences of ineffective communication can be inconvenient, at the least. When it comes to your health, the consequences of ineffective communication can be even greater than an unpleasant meal or disappointing outing. Yet, we often find we leave the doctor’s office with unanswered questions, or a feeling that our concerns were neither heard nor understood. The situation is further complicated when we consider communication about one of the most sensitive topics: your sexual health. Armed with information and effective communication tools, you can take charge of your sexual health.

COMMUNICATION

How effectively we communicate with others can depend, in part, on factors we can control. We can control self-

efficacy and our perceptions of the doctor-patient relationship. Self-efficacy is our perception of having confidence to successfully complete a task. Our levels of self-efficacy vary from task to task. You may be high in self-efficacy for seat belt use as you feel confident about your ability to buckle up each time you sit in a car. On the other hand, you may feel moderate in self-efficacy for monitoring your blood sugar each morning, sometimes you do but other times you forget.

So, how confident are you that you can initiate and sustain conversations about your health needs with your doctor? Folks who feel high in self-efficacy to communicate their health needs engage in more effective discussions with their doctors than those who lack confidence.

Another factor that may seem subtle but still impacts our interactions with our health care providers, is our perception of the doctor and our role in our own health care. Traditionally in our society, doctors have been viewed as

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authority figures, who possess the ability to determine what was in the patient's best interest. Beloved TV doctors like James Kildare, M.D., Marcus Welby, M.D. and Trapper John, M.D. perpetuated the stereotype of the all-knowing medical hero. If doctor knows best then why should you question?

Thinking about the doctor-patient relationship has evolved. Consider your relationship with your doctor as a partnership. It is important to be an active participant in your care and decisions made about your health. The best way to be an equal partner, is to effectively communicate with your health care provider. Remember communication is a two-way street, so listen to what the doctor has to say, but be prepared to speak as well.

SEXUAL HEALTH

Information about mental health, cognitive health, cardiac or heart health is everywhere and we have been advised to pay attention to our blood pressure and blood sugar. But what about sexual health? What is typical, when should we be concerned? When should we consult with our health care provider? Is sexual health something only of concern for people who are sexually active?



As humans, we develop every day, from the beginning to the end of life. It is common knowledge that babies develop in stages. Most babies crawl, then walk, then run. Children's bodies change as they get older and adult bodies do the same. These changes also apply to sexual development, which is one aspect of sexual health. For example, as a result of normal hormonal changes, women experience decreases in estrogen which may result in vaginal dryness. Changes in testosterone levels in men may result in erectile dysfunction. But don't assume that all changes are due to age, changes in sexual health may be related to factors like medication or they may be the product of some other medical condition. For these reasons, communication with your health care provider becomes vital to help you differentiate between typical and atypical sexual development.

If you are not familiar with adult development, educate yourself on what to expect as you age. I remember excitedly running to the book store with my husband when we learned that we were expecting our first child. We purchased the entire collection from the "What to Expect" series. We ran home and started reading "What to Expect When You're Expecting." When our child was born

and we had questions, "What to Expect the First Year" was our guide, and we consulted "What to Expect: the Toddler Years" during the terrible twos. Although a comprehensive guide "What to Expect: Older Adulthood", does not exist, there are many wonderful websites and books that cover the topic of adult development. Some of these resources are listed at the end of this article.

TIPS FOR TALKING WITH YOUR DOCTOR

If you lack confidence or are unfamiliar with human development, communication with your doctor can be embarrassing and may seem difficult. But, it is too important to ignore. Consider these tips as you prepare for your next doctor visit:

- Remember, your sexual health is as important an aspect of your health as any other health topic and your doctor is used to discussing sensitive matters.
- Create a list of questions before your visit so you don't forget all the important topics that you intend to cover. Bring this list with you to your visit.
- Take notes while in the office, but not so much that you are not paying attention. Some people even record (audio or video) their visits. It is not as outrageous as it sounds. Although you don't need your doctor's permission to record in the State of New Jersey, it is recommended that you discuss your plans to record with your health care provider before you begin, for the sake of your relationship.
- Bring a list of medications you are currently taking to your visit, and be sure to include over the counter medications and home remedies, along with their dosages.
- Be truthful, it may be difficult especially if it is about a sensitive subject but it will help your health care provider to make the best recommendations for your care.
- If you think of a question that you forgot to ask, it is okay to email or call the health care provider's office.

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Resources

For more information about issues related to older adults and sexual health please check out the following:

The New Old Age – a blog from the NY Times that addresses current issues related to older adults.

The Centers for Disease and Control and Prevention – informative facts sheets, including one specific to sexual health among older adults:

<https://www.cdc.gov/aging/aginginfo/index.htm>.

The National Institutes of Aging – another source for information specific to adults and sexual health, <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health>.

Our Bodies, Ourselves: Menopause – a comprehensive book covering development for women.