

Teen Talk – Information for Girls



Before you left primary school, you will have had a talk explaining the changes in your body that take place over a few years – you may have a growth spurt, your breasts develop, you grow hair under your arms and in the pubic area, you start your periods. You'll know that, once you start your periods, you are able to become pregnant.

A few of you might have had these changes earlier than usual and had to deal with periods even before you properly understood what they meant. Maybe you will have had some medication or treatment to manage this.

You'll know that, along with the changes in your body, there are often changes in how you feel. Maybe your mood will change suddenly from happy to sad..... or you'll lose your temper and make everyone's life a misery.....or you might stop being a chatty sort of person and turn into someone quiet who wants to be shut away in the bedroom listening to music.

Your friends in school might be talking non-stop about boys and sex, the magazines are full of people looking fantastic and if you have Spina Bifida or disabilities linked to Hydrocephalus, you might be wondering about where you fit in with all this. Remember that most of us don't have amazing sex lives and get by with love and a sense of humour. Most people have had to deal with fancying someone who isn't interested in them or relationships coming to an end.

Some important things to remember before talking about sex

Having a disability doesn't mean you can't have a good sex life. There are lots of men with Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus in loving relationships and often with children of their own. Having a good sex life isn't the only way of being happy.

Having sex – gay or straight (that is with another boy or with a girl) is illegal until you are both sixteen or over. Even if your partner agrees, you could be prosecuted. Even when you're 17, it is illegal for someone like a teacher or a carer in a position of trust to have sex with you.

But it isn't illegal for you to get confidential advice about sex or contraception before you're 17 as long as the person giving it is sure you understand what it's all about. The most important thing is not to feel pressured by anyone to do anything that you're not happy about. You may not feel ready for a sexual relationship or you may have cultural or religious reasons for ruling out sex before marriage. You'll know that some people think that sex is a really important part of their relationship and some that other things matter more. Some people think that same-sex relationships are wrong but others do not.

Teen Talk – Information for Girls



Things that can make life difficult.....

- Having had a lot of people looking at your body and touching you... doctors, nurses, carers. You might feel your body doesn't belong to you. You might have "switched off".
- Feeling unhappy and embarrassed about your body
- Not having much chance to explore your body and find out what feels good.
- Other people thinking that, because you're disabled, you won't be interested in sex
- Missing out on a lot of the playground or going home chat because you are using a taxi or coming to school with your mum or dad.
- Not having much privacy
- Not having much chance to be alone with a boy or same-sex friend
- If you are with a boyfriend, not being sure if you're doing the "right" thing and whether you have different reactions from someone who isn't disabled.
- Having difficulties with your bowel or bladder. Maybe having a urine or colostomy bag.
- Some people take advantage of people with a disability, especially those with learning difficulties or who are not streetwise.

Things that can help

- Feeling good about yourself and looking good
- Starting to build up your independence skills with help from your parents. Remember this might be as hard for them as for you!
- Talking to disabled people who you can trust and who are a bit older than yourself; try out some of your questions on them.
- If your parents can't answer your questions or you feel embarrassed asking them, talking to an adult you can trust: maybe another member of the family, someone in school or a health professional.
- Making sure people respect your privacy ... not easy if you spend much time in hospital
- Getting used to asserting yourself. If you don't want someone to touch you, learn to say so pleasantly but firmly.
- Getting to touch and know your own body and what makes you feel good. If you don't have much feeling in the lower part of your body you might get pleasure from other parts. You might enjoy using perfume or oils.
- Sex isn't just about having intercourse (which is illegal before you are 17 anyway) and you might enjoy kissing and cuddling just as much. You might need to experiment to find a position which is comfortable for you especially if you have a wheelchair getting in the way.
- Making sure you've emptied your bowels and bladder before you go out on a date.

Teen Talk – Information for Girls



Keeping Safe

- Take things slowly and get to know and trust your boyfriend before you get into a physical relationship. Don't be a pushover.
- If you are having sex and don't want to become pregnant, you have to use contraception and you will probably have learnt in school about different methods of this. Your GP or Family Planning Clinic will give you the information you need and find out if there are any medical reasons why one form of contraception might be better for you than another. You might feel shy about going to your GP without your mum or dad but try to get used to this just for ordinary things and everyday illnesses.
- If you are having sex, have safe sex and use a condom. You can pick up a sexually transmitted infection (STI or lovebug) just like anyone else but, if you do not have full feeling in the lower part of your body, you might not be aware of symptoms of pain or stinging or discharge.
- If you have Spina Bifida and your boyfriend is using a condom, it needs to be latex-free as a lot of people with Spina Bifida are allergic to latex.
- Remember that when you're old enough to want to get pregnant and if you or your partner has a family history of Spina Bifida, you should take high dose folic acid tablets before you try so that you will reduce the risk of your baby having Spina Bifida. Women without Spina Bifida in the family should take a low dose tablet.

Age of Consent

- It is not illegal to seek advice and help about sex if you are under 17. This can be advice about sexuality, contraception or just how sex works.
- It's not illegal to be given contraception by a doctor or family planning clinic, providing they are certain that you understand the issues surrounding sex and contraception.
- Clinics are confidential. If you don't want anyone to know you're having sex, that's okay, contraception will still be available to you. If you can, it's better to let your parents know, but that decision is up to you. Clinics will respect your wishes.

Likewise, it's not illegal to seek confidential advice about abortions. If you find yourself pregnant, go and talk through your options with your doctor or one of the many support organisations