



TALKING ABOUT HIV

World AIDS Day on 1 December is a reminder to reach out to others and bring conversations about HIV into the open. The group that most needs our support are young people who are just starting to explore their sexuality.

Do you remember what it's like to be a teenager thinking about physical relations? It's both thrilling and terrifying. Those new emotional experiences can be quite overwhelming – and that's even before thinking about sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV.

The good news is that medical advances have unlocked excellent treatment options to prevent becoming infected with STIs and HIV. Unfortunately, there are still too many lives lost due to the immunodeficiency disease caused by HIV. Much of this is due to those infected not getting the necessary treatment and our society not talking openly about HIV.

Far too often we avoid conversations about HIV and sex, which is the main way the virus gets transmitted. This is especially true for young people, due to discomfort, cultural taboos, lack of accurate knowledge, or the belief that they simply aren't at risk. However, the reality is that an estimated 38% of new infections is amongst the 15-24 age group. Young people are particularly vulnerable because they are more prone to taking risks and having unprotected sex.

HOW DO WE TURN THE TIDE?

We need to talk about sex, the risks involved, STIs and, more importantly, HIV. Whether you're a parent, grandparent, older sibling or other trusted adult, here's how you can start

It starts with you

Conversations about HIV start with educating ourselves, so we have the answers our teens need and dispel some of our own tendencies to stigmatise. Get useful information online from reputable healthcare organisations like the **AIDS Foundation South Africa**, the **South African National AIDS Council (SANAC)** and the **Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS)**, or visit your local clinical or general practitioner (GP) for HIV education, testing and treatment.



Get active

Nobody enjoys awkward conversations, so avoid a formal sit-down and instead broach the subject while cooking, shopping, playing sports or walking the dog. Conversation tends to flow more easily, and it takes the focus off the serious subject matter, creating a more relaxed, natural atmosphere



Seek out relatable stories

Celebrities and fictional characters tend to be wildly popular with teenagers. They also make great starting points for having a chat about something like HIV, so use these stories to help teens relate to the issue, create empathy, dispel myths and inspire hope.



Listen actively

Give the young people in your life your undivided attention. Avoid interrupting, ask open-ended questions and paraphrase their words to show you understand. Pay attention to their opinions, concerns and experiences to show you value their perspectives.



Suspend judgement

It's tough to appear composed if your teen shares something shocking about their personal or sex life, but creating a supportive, non-judgemental environment is crucial to open dialogue. You're not condoning unacceptable behaviour; you're giving them space to express themselves so that you can work together.



Let's start talking and join the UNAIDS initiative ON THE PATH THAT ENDS AIDS. If you need information, counselling or guidance on HIV, contact your employee health and wellness programme.

References

International Journal of Environment Research and Public Health
 Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS)
 WebMD

- ▶ Education department toll free: **0800 111 011**
- ▶ Send a USSD to: ***134*664*38#**
- ▶ Email: **wced@mhg.co.za**

Let us stay mindful of caring for one another and ourselves

