

# Supporting young people to talk to their doctor about sexual health



Young people might feel unsure, embarrassed, or even anxious about talking to a health professional like a doctor or nurse about sexual health. As someone who works closely with young people, you can help break down these barriers and support them to have positive conversations with health professionals.

**Why is it important for young people to talk to a doctor about sexual health?**



Talking to a health professional about sexual health is an essential part of maintaining overall wellbeing for young people. Early conversations with healthcare professionals can help prevent sexually transmissible infections (STIs), unplanned pregnancies, and other sexual health concerns.

**If the young people you're working with are still concerned about visiting a health professional, they can check out [Nurse Nettie](#) or call the nurses at the [NSW Sexual Health Infolink](#).**

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## Barriers to young people talking to their doctor

### Embarrassment, fear of judgment to chat about sexual health

Young people may feel embarrassed or fear being judged when discussing sexual health, especially if their upbringing didn't openly address these topics.

#### How you can help

Normalising talking to a health professional can help young people feel more comfortable and accepted.

- Let them know that conversations with health professionals are private and confidential.
- Frame sexual health as a normal part of looking after your health and wellbeing.
- Share statistics and insights on how common STIs and sexual health concerns are among young people (remember, chlamydia affects 1 in 5 young people).
- Reinforce that doctors are there to help, not judge, and that they have conversations about sexual health regularly.
- Link young people in with peer workers or let them know that they can bring a support person to any appointment.

### They're concerned about the cost



Young people may have concerns about the cost of STI tests and sexual health appointments, which could prevent them from seeking care.

#### How you can help

If a young person has a Medicare card and visits a bulk-billing GP, youth health clinic or Aboriginal Medical Service (AMS), there should be no out of pocket costs. If they don't have a Medicare card, call the [Sexual Health Infolink](#) to seek advice on alternative options.

Young people can also use the [Play Safe testing locator map](#) to find a suitable health service close to them.

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## Barriers to young people talking to their doctor

### Mistrust and misunderstanding about confidentiality and health professionals

Many young people worry that their discussions with doctors won't remain private.

#### How you can help

If a young person asks about confidentiality, reassure them that conversations that happen with health professionals will stay private and confidential. Information that is discussed can't be shared unless the health professional determines there is a risk to the young person or to others. A person also does not need to say why they need to see a doctor when booking an appointment.

Reassure young people that STI results are private and won't appear on Medicare records (so parents can't see them). Let young people know they can also apply for their own Medicare card once they turn 15.

If a young person has a My Health Record, parents and carers are listed as authorised representatives on the account until the young person turns 14. When a young person turns 14, authorised representative are automatically removed from the young person's My Health Record. This means they will no longer have access to their record and can't see information in it.

### Feeling intimidated

Young people often feel uncomfortable at the doctor, especially when discussing sexual health. The clinical setting and medical jargon can make it even harder for young people to feel comfortable and heard.

#### How you can help

Encourage them to:

- ask the doctor to explain the information in a way they can understand
- be open and honest, so the doctor can provide the right help and advice
- write down questions beforehand to feel more prepared
- ask the health professional to write down important notes and information so they can take it home afterwards
- consider bringing a support person.

Remember, they have the right to ask questions and make decisions about their own body.



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## Barriers to young people talking to their doctor

### Limited knowledge on why sexual health is important

Young people might not know what to ask or even understand why sexual health matters.

#### How you can help

Explain why sexual health matters and that it should be thought of as part of overall health and wellbeing. You can focus on the importance of preventing STIs, having regular sexual health checks and, if relevant, preventing unplanned pregnancies.

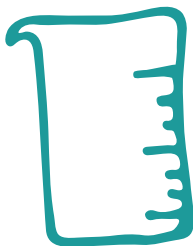
You can help young people understand what to expect during a visit to a health professional, what questions a doctor or nurse might ask, what tests could be done, and that it's all about keeping them healthy. You can also suggest questions they might want to ask their doctor, such as:

- How can I protect myself from STIs?
- What contraception options are available for me?
- How often should I get tested for STIs?
- Can I get tested without anyone knowing?

To brush up on your skills, you can read the [Youth Worker Factsheet](#).

You can also share the [Sexual Health Check Factsheet For Young People](#).

### They're nervous about getting tested



The uncertainty of the STI testing process can cause anxiety for young people. They may worry about discomfort, pain, or what will happen if they get a positive result.

#### How you can help

To reduce this anxiety, explain the process in simple, clear terms. Let them know that most STI tests are quick, easy, and often painless. STI testing includes a urine or swab test, and a blood test.

By demystifying the process, you can help young people feel more at ease and confident about going to their doctor.

You can also share the [Sexual Health Check Factsheet For Young People](#) to help them prepare for the appointment.

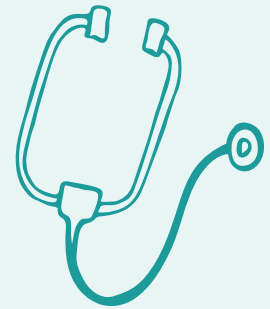


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## Role play activity: Preparing for a sexual health visit

1. **Set the scene:** Explain the purpose of the role play is to practice talking about sexual health with a doctor in a safe space.
2. **Start the conversation:** Begin by asking typical questions a doctor might ask, like 'What is the purpose of our visit today', 'What kind of sexual activities do you engage in with your sexual partner(s)?' and guide the young person in practicing their responses.
3. **Encourage questions:** Help them practice asking their own questions, such as 'How can I prevent STIs?' or 'Are STI tests confidential?'.
4. **Provide feedback:** Discuss how they felt during the role play, what was challenging, and how to build confidence for the real visit.
5. **Reinforce preparation:** Remind them to write down questions before the appointment and let them know they could visit a different doctor to their usual GP if they prefer.



## STAY UP TO DATE



Clinical information evolves. Many reliable sources, like the [Play Safe](#) and [Play Safe Pro](#) websites, offer current guidance for youth workers and young people. Subscribe to the [Play Safe Pro newsletter](#) to stay up to date with our free resources, factsheets, tools, and interactive activities.

If you can't answer a question, or need more support, advise the young people you work with to contact [Nurse Nettie](#) or the [NSW Sexual Health Infolink](#).