

ADOLESCENT HEALTH CARE AND THE PEDIATRICIAN

Pediatricians are trained in the care of children from the newborn to the young adult. In the past, teenagers may have felt that they have "fallen between the cracks" : too young for adult medicine and too old for pediatrics. We would like to reassure teens that all members of our pediatric department are trained and experienced in the care of adolescents. Our knowledge of child development is especially useful in understanding the many physical, emotional, and intellectual changes of adolescence. We are happy to continue seeing our patients until they graduate from high school or until age 18. However, teens do have the option of obtaining medical care in the departments of family practice or internal medicine if they so desire. We do prefer that teens consistently use the same department (and hopefully the same physician, as much as possible) and not switch back and forth.

Optimally, we would like to be able to provide care for teenagers in a separate area, away from the younger children. Unfortunately, at present, we simply do not have any extra space available.

CONSENT LAW

California law requires parental consent for medical treatment at each visit for children under 18 years old. Practically, what this means is that a parent must accompany the teen to each visit, though they do not have to be present in the exam room. Many teens feel more comfortable seeing the physician alone while the parent stays in the waiting room. The adolescent also needs to develop a sense of responsibility for his or her own health care, so most of us believe it's often a good idea for the teen to see the doctor alone. A parent may also send a written, signed authorization with the teen to the appointment if they cannot be present. Teens do not need their parents consent for diagnosis and treatment related to contraception, pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, or drug or alcohol problems.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Most of the health care sought by adolescents is for simple problems like acne, colds, sore throats, injuries and routine physicals for school or sports. For these visits, the issue of confidentiality does not usually arise. However, it's important that teens understand that whatever is said between patient and doctor is confidential. Without the teen's permission, no information that the physician learns from the teen, from the physical exam, or from any lab tests will be

revealed to the parents or anyone else. These laws were created to encourage teenagers to seek help early, rather than waiting too long because of fear of being "discovered" by the parent. Even though the physician may feel that parents would be supportive and would help a teen speak with his parents about a difficult problem, ultimately the decision is up to the teen. We will support a teen's request for confidentiality with the exception of any concerns about suicide or threat of harm to others.

SERVICES

The pediatrician is available to help with many of the problems facing today's teenager. Please feel free to call or make an appointment if you have questions or concerns about puberty, menstruation, sex, birth control, sexually transmitted diseases, AIDS, drug or alcohol use, etc. Most of us do pelvic exams, PAP smears, venereal disease testing, and pregnancy testing. We can also offer brief counseling about sexuality, drug use, depression, etc or can direct the teen to other professionals who can help.

We have a large collection of pamphlets concerning issues important to adolescents including sports, sex education, birth control, sexually transmitted diseases, drug use, smoking, drinking and driving, etc. The physician may give you some of these during a visit.

Some may be available in the waiting room. Please don't be shy about asking for written information about any topic that interests you.

Adolescence can be a time of conflict, but it can also be a chance for families to mature as their child moves closer to independence and adulthood. During these sometimes difficult years, we would like you to know that we are available to help. We are eager to continue our relationship with the child and parents through this tumultuous journey to adulthood.

RECOMMENDED READING

Parents:

Between Parent and Teenager: Ginott
The Family Handbook of Adolescence: Schowalker and Anjan
You and Your Adolescent: Steinberg and Levine

Teens

The Teenage Body Book: McCoy and Wibbelsman
A Young Man's Guide to Sex: Gale
A Young Woman's Guide to Sex: Voss
Changing Bodies, Changing Lives: Bell