

# Helping Teens Navigate a Safe Passage From Childhood to Adulthood

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## Introduction

When was the last time you counseled a teenage patient in your pharmacy about a medication or health issue? Teenagers want and need to discuss sensitive health issues with a concerned health care provider. But many teens feel they have no one to talk with about personal health matters. In a recent survey, more than 70% of adolescents reported they had engaged in at least one potentially risky behavior, such as smoking or substance abuse.<sup>[1]</sup> However, the majority (63%) had not discussed these behaviors with a health care provider.

This "don't ask, don't tell" mindset among teens and their health care providers can have tragic consequences. For example, 13% of American teens between the ages of 14 and 17 considered suicide in 2000, but only 36% of these people received counseling or mental health treatment.<sup>[2]</sup> Adolescents and teenagers are also at high risk for misusing or abusing medications. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration,<sup>[3]</sup> nearly 3 million young people aged 12 to 17 years used prescription drugs for nonmedical reasons at least once in 2001.

Counseling teenagers to change risky behaviors or adhere to medication therapy can be challenging, even frustrating. But helping young people make a safe, successful transition from childhood to adulthood is also extremely rewarding. At Kids'n Cures, a full-service pediatric community pharmacy in Boardman, Ohio, my colleagues and I have counseled many adolescents and teens over the years. Here are some counseling strategies we have found work well with these patients.

- **Take time to listen.** With teenagers, I try to listen more than talk. With their growing need for autonomy and independence, teens may resent or ignore a pharmacist who appears to be telling them what to do. I look for ways to build rapport and establish trust, such as by asking nonthreatening, open-ended questions or recalling a relevant incident from my own teenage years. Keep in mind, however, that teens tend to have generational tunnel vision and may not believe that you once experienced similar rites of passage. Teens also need to know they can talk to you in confidence. When they want to discuss sensitive health issues, show them you take their concerns seriously by offering counseling in a private or semiprivate area, if possible.
- **Ask a younger colleague to assist.** When a teen seems uncommunicative or uncomfortable with me, I often ask a younger pharmacist to counsel instead. At Kids'n Cures, our pharmacy interns have been particularly adept at counseling

adolescents and teens. These young practitioners vividly recall their own teenage years, and many have teenage siblings at home with problems and concerns similar to those of our patients.

- **Offer a selection of products and services geared to teenagers.** We stock a wide selection of skin care products and vitamins, which appeals to teens, who have a strong interest in their physical appearance and fitness. Questions about these products often provide an initial opportunity for the pharmacist to establish dialogue with a teen. Kids'n Cures has a collaborative relationship with a local dietitian who is available to counsel teens in the pharmacy on nutritional issues such as weight management and healthful eating. We also carry a line of patient educational materials developed specifically for teenagers.
- **Find out what makes the teen tick.** By asking about a teen's interests and activities, the pharmacist can often learn what motivates him or her, then use this information to put peer pressure to work in a positive way. For example, a teenager who smokes may be more motivated to quit because of concern about offensive breath and skin damage than because of concerns about the long-term risk of lung cancer. Similarly, an athletic teenager with asthma may be more likely to adhere to inhaler therapy if he or she believes that regular medication use will improve his or her ability to participate in sports. Because teens often harbor the illusion that they are invulnerable, they may not connect their actions with long-term consequences. During counseling, pharmacists need to help teens understand the dangers of risky behaviors in terms that are relevant to them.
- **Watch for red flags.** Be alert for signs of depression, suicidal thoughts, eating disorders, and other serious problems in these patients. For example, if a teen wants to buy multiple boxes of diet drugs or vitamins, try to engage him or her in a discussion about the purchase and assess for an eating disorder or other problem.
- **Offer other resources.** Pharmacists cannot be all things to all teens. In many cases, our role is to help teenagers -- and their parents -- connect with community resources or other health care professionals who can provide further information and assistance.

## Counseling Teens With Chronic Illnesses

Along with the normal turbulence of adolescence, many teens are faced with the stress of managing a chronic illness, such as asthma, diabetes, or epilepsy. Numerous studies have shown that adolescents and teenagers with chronic illness are at high risk for not adhering to their medication and other therapies.<sup>[4-7]</sup> For some teens, refusing to take prescribed medications is a way to assert independence from parental or medical authority. Others may be reluctant to take their medications or adhere to self-care measures out of fear that the illness and its treatment will make them seem different or isolated from their peers.

A concerned pharmacist can help teens cope with peer pressure and improve their adherence and self-care. Sometimes, a small change in a patient's medication regimen,

such as substituting a long-acting medication for one that must be taken at school, can make a big difference. A teenager with asthma may find a small, discrete inhaler/spacer that tucks easily into a purse or backpack much "cooler" and more acceptable than a bulkier device.

Although some teens wish to keep their illness private, I often encourage them to not hide their illness and to be open and honest with their peers. Through empathetic counseling, the pharmacist can help to build the teen's self-esteem and encourage more confident interactions with peers. For example, I sometimes role-play with patients ways to handle stressful social encounters, such as being teased about taking insulin injections or using a peak flow meter. Or I might encourage patients to prepare a class project to educate peers about their illness and what it is like to live with it.

At Kids'n Cures, we strive to cultivate strong professional relationships with school nurses, who are invaluable members of the health care team for teenagers (and other children) with chronic illnesses. For example, our pharmacy offers direct-to-school delivery of prescription medications to improve patient adherence. We also work with school nurses to develop child-specific educational materials and medication action plans.

Invariably, I learn as much or more from my teenage patients as they do from me. When I encounter teens who cope with their illnesses especially well, I ask what motivates their positive outlook and excellent adherence. Often, the insights these patients provide can be used to help other teens improve their own adherence and emotional adjustment. In some instances, highly motivated teens have offered to talk with newly diagnosed patients in my practice to share their experiences and provide support.

Parents of teenagers with chronic illnesses often need pharmacy-based education and support, as well. In a large pharmacy, space may be available to host parent support groups that meet periodically. Alternatively, pharmacists may help parents find other resources in the community or share the names of parents who wish to create informal support networks.

### **Today's Teens Are Pharmacy's Future**

The nearly 20 million Americans who were teenagers in 2001 are poised to become the next generation of adult pharmacy patrons. Let's start educating them now about proper medication use and healthful behaviors so they can experience firsthand the benefits of pharmaceutical care and view the pharmacist as a lifelong resource for information about medications and self-care. By taking a greater interest in the health concerns of our teenage patients, we can change the perilous attitude of "don't ask, don't tell" to one of "let's talk."

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