

**Do ask, do tell: Broaching the subject of STDs**

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After dating his current boyfriend for two months, Craig knew it was time to broach a difficult conversation.

“When we were about to get intimate, I said, ‘I need to let you know something about me,’” says Craig, 34, of Shirley. “I said, ‘I’m HIV positive.’”

It’s not the type of thing you necessarily want to hear when you’re about to get close to someone you’re dating. But whether you’re straight or gay, a teenager, college student, young adult, Baby Boomer or senior citizen, it’s all the same: Before you have sex, you should have a talk about sexually transmitted diseases if you want to protect yourself and your partner, say sex educators and dating experts.

Having that conversation is even more critical these days, when 1 in 5 Americans has genital herpes and 90 percent of them don’t know it, says Laura Berman, director of the Berman Center in Chicago, a health-care facility specializing in women’s sexual and reproductive health.

Berman cites a recent survey conducted by Harris Interactive for Novartis Pharmaceuticals Corp., and the American Social Health Association, in which 28 percent of 1,900 respondents said they felt it was more taboo to talk about having genital herpes than about HIV (20 percent), mental illness (14 percent) or obesity (10 percent) with a sexual partner.

**The ‘ick’ factor**

“When you think about dating, there’s unfortunately this taboo built around it and there’s this ‘ick’ factor associated with it which is not as present with the other sexually transmitted diseases,” she said.

“It doesn’t really make sense, given that herpes is basically a skin condition, but I think people are particularly affected by the idea of herpes because there’s no cure for it.... It is basically just a skin condition that can be effectively managed through medication and safer sex practices.”

The Harris survey also showed that 61 percent of respondents who have genital herpes say that revealing their condition to partners was troubling to them.

Berman, who was a partner in the release of the survey, advises daters to get tested for genital

herpes and other sexually transmitted diseases before they enter a new sexual relationship. If you're already dating, she says, you might suggest that the two of you get tested together.

If you know you have an STD and you're dating, be knowledgeable about your condition, Berman says. Then you'll be able to explain your diagnosis and any symptoms you may have to a potential mate, as well as how your condition is being treated and any medications you're taking.

She and others acknowledge that some people are apprehensive about revealing their STD condition, fearing the other person's reaction.

She suggests raising the issue anyway - in natural conversation.

"You could say, 'If I'm attracted to someone - and I'm definitely attracted to you - I make a point to talk about our STD history, and I want to share with you mine,'" Berman says.

### **Ask the question**

And don't assume that your date is going to come out and tell you he or she has an STD, says Karen Ross, chief program officer at Long Island Association for AIDS Care in Hauppauge.

"You should be bringing up the question," she says.

Even then, she adds, you may not always get an honest answer. Therefore, Ross says, "proceed with caution" and keep your head. "A few minutes of pleasure can really cost you a lifetime of having to deal with HIV and some other diseases."

STDs are not a first-date conversation topic, nor something you'd discuss on the phone, in an e-mail or in a letter, experts say. Instead, find a private place where you'd both be comfortable to talk, or bring it up while you're doing something active, like taking a walk.

Craig - who asked that his last name not be used because he's afraid of repercussions from people who don't know of his condition - says he and his boyfriend were about to become intimate when he revealed he has HIV. He slowed things down, explained his diagnosis and how he is keeping healthy. "He said, 'You're not dying now, are you?'"

No, Craig said, but "I told him one day you may have to take care of me.' I gave him the blunt of it, so he understood. I said, 'If you don't want to see me, I understand. If you want to be intimate, we have to use precautions.' He said, 'No problem.'"

Craig says it was stressful because he knew his boyfriend could have heard the news and walked away. Did he consider not telling? No, Craig says, because HIV can lead to AIDS, for which there still is no cure. "I consider that like killing someone," he adds. "I'm firm on telling the person. You have to."

If you're concerned about how to bring up such a dicey topic, try asking some questions to gauge

what the other person is thinking, says Don Gabor, a Brooklyn-based communications trainer and author of “How to Start a Conversation and Make Friends” (Fireside).

“You might try sending up some trial balloons in terms of the conversation. Get a sense of that person’s sensitivity to it,” he says.

If things are moving fast and furious, you might want to take a more direct approach, such as asking, “Do you have any health issues I should know about?” he says. “If nobody’s forcing you to hop in the sack on the first date or second date ... take it one date at a time, and just get to know the person on a comfortable level and a personal level. Then people will feel comfortable opening up with good and bad.”

If you’re newly dating and simply want to put the conversation on the table, casually bring it up, says Andrea Syrtash, the Manhattan host of *ondating.tv*, a Web-based dating-advice program.

### **Don’t do a monologue**

“Invite the person into the conversation, so you’re not doing a monologue. Get his thoughts. Get her thoughts,” she says. “Your approach is going to affect the results, so approach it like, ‘Why shouldn’t I ask you this?’ This is a normal adult conversation. Don’t put a stigma around it. If someone freaks out or laughs and can’t handle it, good thing you found that out.”

If you, in fact, have an STD and want to tell the person you’re dating, be open and honest, Syrtash says, but avoid theatrics and melodrama.

“Don’t call the person and tell the person, ‘There is something I’ve got to tell you.’ Don’t build it up to that huge moment. You’ve just added a lot of pressure,” she says.

“You could say, ‘I believe in open communication and this is something I just want to discuss should this relationship grow.’ If you make it a big deal it will be a big deal with a lot of pressure.”

If you’re uncomfortable talking about it, start the conversation by telling your partner that, she says. “It’s just a good lesson to connect with the people we’re dating in a really honest way. It’s OK to be a bit vulnerable. That helps to create intimacy.”

Next, give the other person time to absorb the news, Ross says. “Give them time to research on their own, or be able to have information that you could give them so that they can have time to process it.”

Prepare yourself for whatever the other person’s reaction might be, including one you don’t want to hear. In addition, recognize the other person’s right to decide about how - or even whether - to continue in the relationship.

“If they’re just in there for some fun, then obviously the risk might not be reasonable to that

person,” Gabor says. “If the other person has a greater investment in the relationship, or if he or she doesn’t but wants to, then the person may say, ‘I can live with that.’”

No matter how the person reacts, or how you feel about how he or she may react, there is no excuse for keeping silent, experts agree.

“If you don’t trust this person enough to talk about it, why are you trusting him or trusting her enough to get into bed with them unprotected?” says Nicole Verdi, a social worker at Planned Parenthood of Nassau County.

“Silence is the worst thing because it could mean your life. Keeping quiet, not asking questions could mean you life. So why are you keeping quiet?”

Talking, Syrtash says, is “a win-win. You’re either going to get closer for talking about it because something’s not on your mind that’s distracting you, or ... if the partner reacts poorly, judgmental, doesn’t want to listen, doesn’t want to communicate, it’s good you found that out because that’s probably not the partner you want to be with.”

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