



Heart Disease, Sexuality and Social Pressure

Tips from Adolescents and Young Adults

“Since I was a pre-teen, my cardiologist would talk to me about the risks of certain social practices including drinking, doing drugs, smoking, having sex, and getting tattoos or piercings.”

The risks of social decisions such as drugs, alcohol, and tattoos depend on the individual and their medical history. However, being aware of these issues is relevant to all teens and young adults with heart disease. You can make the safest decisions for you by staying informed of the risks. You can have a confidential conversation with your heart center healthcare team at any time without your parents. Although the heart center healthcare team always encourages you to involve your parents, these conversations can occur in private and the content of the discussion will remain between you and your healthcare provider.

Sexuality and heart disease

What do you mean by sexuality?

Sexuality includes the ways our body works, our gender, our sexual orientation, and our values about love and relationships. It affects how we look, how we speak, how we act and think about our bodies. Sometimes a person's sexuality can be affected by a serious illness, such as heart disease. Having heart disease can affect how you feel about your body image and how you feel you look to others. It can also affect how tired or active you feel, and how you talk or express yourself. All of these make a difference in how you experience your sexuality when you have heart disease.

Who can I talk to about sex and sexuality?

Talking about sex can sometimes be difficult or embarrassing. But it is really important to ask questions and to talk with your heart center healthcare team about your concerns. Your healthcare team can talk to you about these things during an office visit or over the phone. Do not worry, these conversations will be private. Your heart center team sees many teens and young adults, and you are not the only one with questions, so feel free to ask those tough questions that are important to you.

What do I need to talk to my doctor or nurse practitioner about?

If you are having intimate contact (like sexual touching or sexual intercourse) with anyone, it is important to talk to someone on your healthcare team about it. Even if you are not having intimate contact now, but think you might at any time, it would be good to talk to your doctor or nurse practitioner about this. There are some times that you might need to avoid sexual contact to stay healthy. Your heart center healthcare team is there to help you navigate these difficult issues.

What about birth control?

If you are female, becoming pregnant can have major implications on someone with heart disease. It is important that you take the time to talk to your heart center team about what the risks are for you.

If you are thinking about birth control options, it is important to talk to your heart center team first to insure that there are not any special considerations. For example, if you are thinking about birth control pills, not every brand is the same, and in some circumstances these differences may mean that it is not safe for your heart.

What about alcohol, drugs and tattoos?

Just because you have heart disease doesn't mean that you aren't exposed to peer pressure. But, it can make it more important for you to avoid these things. Talk to your heart center team if you are considering any of the activities listed below so that you can have all the best information to insure your own health and safety.

Alcohol

Alcohol is processed through your liver. Certain types of heart disease can impact your liver function and thus change how you might process alcohol. In addition, many heart medicines are metabolized by your liver and mixing them with alcohol can change how well they work. In some cases, alcohol can make your medicines less effective. In other cases, alcohol can mix with your medicine in a way that you may cause you to experience toxic levels. Talk to your heart center team in order to insure that you are adequately informed.

Illegal Drugs

Illegal drugs are not recommended at any time because they are against the law and very dangerous to your health and wellbeing. This is especially true because certain drugs, such as cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine, can be particularly dangerous to individuals with heart disease. Some drugs stress your heart with high heart rates or with irregular heart rhythms and your health could be seriously threatened. However, we understand that you might have questions. Your heart center team would much rather have an open conversation about this topic than have your questions go unanswered.

Tattoos

Tattoos are increasingly common among teens and young adults, and you might be thinking about getting one. This is another topic that you need to talk to your heart center team about. Tattoos may potentially cause serious infections of the heart that can be life threatening. It is important to know the facts and how to limit your risks before making a decision about getting a tattoo.

To Learn More

- Heart Center
206-987-2015
- Your healthcare
provider
- seattlechildrens.org

Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask
your nurse.
- From outside the
hospital, call the
toll-free Family
Interpreting Line
1-866-583-1527. Tell
the interpreter the
name or extension you
need.

What do other heart center peers say?

“If I hadn’t asked, I would have never known. I am glad I am informed to make the best decisions for me.”

-Kelsey, age 17

“Since I was a pre-teen, my cardiologist would talk to me about the risks of certain social practices including drinking, doing drugs, smoking, having sex, and getting tattoos or piercings. I have always erred on the side of caution with these activities, but it can also be difficult to draw the line between curious experimentation and risky behavior that could cause me harm.

For example, I would not decide to get a tattoo at an unknown tattoo parlor while on vacation in California. A better decision would be to consult my cardiologist, research tattoo parlors, discuss my medical situation with the artist, and make an informed decision that is best for me.”

-Lisa, age 21

“Drugs: Certain drugs could react with the medications I take and alter my heart rate, so I avoid taking anything without my cardiologist’s consent.

Alcohol: My liver function is checked annually. The heart and liver are closely related, so alcohol could hurt me more than the average person.

Tattoos: I don’t want one, but my cardiologist said to talk with her in case I change my mind.

Sex: I talked to my doctor about it so I know the risks.”

-Brady, age 18

“Having heart issues is a really good excuse for not wanting to do things that you would otherwise be pressured to do by peers. My experience has been that nobody questions you when you use it as an excuse, and the peer pressure to do whatever it is quickly stops.”

-Katie, age 18