



# Talking Sex

## QUICK LINKS

- In **Part 1** Talking Pleasure we'll go over how to talk about the stuff you like in a way that's safe and comfortable for you.
- In **Part 2** Talking Boundaries we'll explain sexual boundaries and how to communicate them.
- In **Part 3** Talking consent we'll explore how to communicate to make sure boundaries are respected and that consent is maintained.
- In **Part 4** Talking Safe Sex and Sexual Health we'll address how to communicate about sexual health, protection, STIs, and safer sex.

Let's face it, talking about sex and sexual health may feel difficult. There is no easy way to have these conversations without encountering a few awkward moments. This is because there is so much stigma and taboo around the subject! Sex stigma can feel more intense both for young and LGBTQ+ people. So, when you're young and LGBTQ+, talking about sex can feel really intimidating for some.

**FACT** - talking about your sexual preferences with a partner is not only normal and necessary, but also helps to demystify and destigmatize sex for everyone involved! Despite the challenges with these kinds of conversations, communication is essential to having better sex and forming healthier relationships in the long run.

In the following guide, we'll provide some helpful tips to help you through "the sex talk". Our goal is to help you get prepared and begin to establish healthy lines of communication with your sexual partners.

## Part 1 - Talking Pleasure (What You Like)

- Although talking about pleasure can feel awkward, expressing our desires can also lead to better sex in the long run!
- The first step in communicating your desires is getting a sense of what they are - it's important to give this some thought on your own (if this is difficult you can also try brainstorming with someone else).
- There are ways to communicate your desires before, during, and after sex - it comes down to what you're trying to say, and when you're most comfortable saying it.
- Just because you're talking about sex doesn't automatically mean you want it.
- Talking about sex should never be about forcing a sexual partner into a conversation they aren't comfortable or ready to have.

Talking about what you like sexually should feel really empowering. Sharing your desires can create a sex-positive dynamic where everyone feels safe and respected expressing and exploring their fantasies! Communication sets up opportunities to talk about our boundaries - which we'll get into in the next section.

The first step in starting this conversation is to get a sense of what sex you want. Some of this

knowledge comes with experience, but it never hurts to consider what you're looking for in a sexual encounter before having sex. Ask yourself: what kinds of words, phrases, situations, actions, or positions get me in the mood? If you're feeling overwhelmed by this question, you're not alone! This can be a lot to think about. Luckily, there are some awesome tools available to help organize your thoughts. Check out the links below for more information!

### **1. Yes, No, Maybe So: A Sexual Inventory Stocklist**

<http://www.scarleteen.com/sites/files/scarleteen/yesnomaybe.pdf>

Scarleteen is an inclusive youth sexual health promotion website. This checklist explores a ton of important topics beyond just pleasure and physical sex. You can indicate what you like/don't like/might like as far as sexual terminology, relationship styles, contraceptive methods, and other sexual health stuff! Give it a go and take an inventory of your sexual self.

### **2. Let's Talk About Sex: A Worksheet**

<https://www.autostraddle.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/sexapalooza-handout-branded.pdf>

Autostraddle is an online Queer feminist magazine. This worksheet is a little more focused on the physical stuff than the Scarleteen Stocklist, but it also gives you a lot more space to explore and express your desires, fantasies, and boundaries in a really creative way. Give it a try and sketch out the sex you want!

## **WHAT TO SAY AND HOW TO SAY IT**

Remember, our sexual partners can't read our minds. Once you've thought about what you like, try expressing your preferences. This expression can many forms, both verbal or physical. While it can feel a bit awkward to start this conversation, it can help to clarify what you want and can actually enhance your sexual experience!

Before sex, try sitting a sexual partner down and telling them about what turns you on. This can help prepare everyone for what's about to happen. You can say stuff like:

- *Hey, just so you know, I like it when...*
- *I'm ready to try something new and I want to talk to you about it before we try...*

During or after sex you might say:

- *That feels really good*
- *I really like this, but can we try slowing down?*
- *Can we try that again another time?*
- *Let's remember this position for next time!*
- *Can you put on more lube?*

Remember, these are just examples – Only you know your circumstance, so you'll have to change so it makes sense to you. You do not have to follow this guide, and by all means, feel free to adapt it for your own sexual experiences!

## **WHEN AND WHERE TO SAY IT**

This really depends on what you're trying to say. Generally, you should be able to talk about sex and pleasure anytime. Letting your partner know in the moment can help you both adapt together. Other times, you might want to set aside a few minutes for a more serious talk, especially if you want to bring up something that might make you or them feel uncomfortable. In these cases, try having the talk in a place you don't consider sexually-charged (for example, in the living room instead of the bedroom). This can create a helpful distance between a talk about sex and sex itself.

## TIPS

### 1. Talking about sex is not having sex

The most important thing to keep in mind when you're talking about sex is that you should never have to cross a boundary you don't want to cross or do something you are not ready for. Remember: if you want to start talking about sex and pleasure, but don't feel ready to engage in sex physically, that is your choice and your right. Saying this clearly to a partner can help keep the pressure off. Talking about sex should never lead to sex unless you want it to.

### 2. Don't push the issue

On the other hand, if you are ready to talk about sex, but they don't seem as excited about the topic, it might not a good time to bring it up. If you want people to respect your boundaries, then you must also do the same. You can't make someone talk about something they don't want to talk about. If you continue to push the issue, chances are you'll also be pushing the person away.

## Part 2 - Talking Boundaries (What you don't like, might like, and what you're not quite ready for)

- Clearly defining boundaries is a great way to make sure that every sexual encounter is one where everyone involved feels safe, respected, and comfortable.
- Before talking about your boundaries, think about what they are. What's off limits? What's something you might want to try, but don't feel quite ready for? What are you ready to try?
- There's lots you can say to put yourself and a sexual partner at ease. Using "I" statements is one example.
- Conversations about sexual boundaries tend to go better when we have them face-to-face, outside of the bedroom, and before sex happens.
- Try to be clear in expressing and asserting your boundaries.
- Be careful with your language.
- People and their boundaries change all the time, and that's normal.
- Try to make discussions about boundaries an ongoing part of any relationship.

Talking about our sexual boundaries is just as important, if not more, than talking about our desires. Clearly defining boundaries is a great way to make sure that every sexual encounter is one where everyone involved feels safe, respected, and comfortable. It also helps start a necessary conversation about consent, a really important topic that we'll get into in part 3 of this Guide.

Before you bring up your boundaries in conversation, try and think about what they are. Really be clear with yourself about which kinds of sex you don't like, or might like but don't feel ready to try. You can use some of the same tools listed in the section on pleasure. If, while looking through these tools, you see something that doesn't sit well with you, take note. That 'gut feeling' is probably a good indication that you might not be ready or that it's just not for you.

## WHAT TO SAY AND HOW TO SAY IT

You can set up for a conversation about boundaries by asking a sexual partner if they might be able to

set aside some time to talk. You might suggest a “check-ins” about where you’re at physically, and where you might go. You could say something like:

- *Hey - there’s nothing to worry about - but I just wanted to ask if we could make some time to talk about what we’re comfortable with sexually. I just want to make sure we’re on the same page.*

If you feel like you’re ready to start talking about boundaries, you can say stuff like:

- *I know we might not be ready, but I wanted to talk to you about my limits around sex and get a sense of yours too. That way we can make some agreements around both.*
- *I really like what we’ve been doing physically so far. But before we go any further, I want for both of us to be on the same page. I would never want to make wrong assumptions about what is ok or not ok to do. Why don’t we talk about it beforehand?*
- *Sex and physical intimacy can complicate relationships for a lot of people, and I don’t want that to happen to us. Can we start talking about our boundaries to make sure we’re clear on what’s ok and what isn’t.*
- *I’m not really sure how to start this conversation... but I think it’s important for us to talk about our sexual boundaries before anyone’s boundaries get crossed. Is that ok?*

If you noticed above, it can be really helpful to frame conversations about sex using “I” statements. This just means taking a second to make sure that what you’re saying starts with you, and not the feelings or actions of someone else. Instead of saying “you make me feel like...” or “you always do this...” you might say “I feel like...” or “when this happens, it makes me feel...” Using “I” statements can help our points sound less like accusations and more like invitations into an active conversation. Sometimes people stop listening and start getting defensive when they feel like they are being called out. Instead, try ‘calling in’.

Guide to Calling In: <https://everydayfeminism.com/2015/01/guide-to-calling-in/>

## WHEN AND WHERE TO SAY IT

Conversations about sex can be had online or via text, but it’s a good idea when possible (especially if you’re talking about boundaries) to have these discussions face-to-face. Even though this might seem like a more challenging way to express your feelings, it helps build trust and healthy communication. Also, while expressing your desires during sex can be healthy and enhance the experience, this is not the case for sexual boundaries. It’s always a good idea to clearly establish boundaries before sex.

Like with conversations about our desires, conversations about sexual boundaries tend to go better when we have them outside of sexually-charged spaces (for example, not in the bedroom). We tend to feel more vulnerable or distracted at times or places associated with sex, so it can be trickier to navigate sexual conversations without getting uncomfortable.

### 1. Be brave!

Ask your sexual partner(s) to take boundaries as seriously as you do. This conversation is ultimately about respect. Over time this kind of communication will become a natural, and in the long run this means more honesty, stronger trust, and better sex! If you feel really scared about even bringing up this subject with a partner, it might be a sign that you’re in an unhealthy relationship. Feeling like you can’t express your boundaries, or feeling pressured to have sex is never ok. Try talking to a friend, family member, or counsellor to explore why you might be feeling this way. Asking people we trust for advice in navigating complicated relationships can be really helpful. You should never try to have a conversation that might put you at risk. While it’s important to stick up for ourselves, it should never come at our own risk. It’s important for us to feel safe and supported in expressing boundaries. If you don’t, it might be time to reevaluate.

## 2. Be careful with your language

People use lots of different terms to describe their bodies and sexual boundaries. Try to be as clear and inclusive as possible with your language and never assume someone knows what you're talking about when you use a certain term. On the other hand, try to be careful about how you respond when a sexual partner uses a term, you're not familiar with. If someone says something you don't quite understand, or something that catches you off-guard, try not to respond with shock or anger. It's important to be sensitive, attentive, and respectful when exploring sex and boundaries. Ask the person to explain the term or what they mean. You might say something like "I want to be as supportive a partner as I can. Part of that is being on the same page about sex and terminology. Would you mind telling me what you mean when you say \_\_\_?" Remember, for many people sex is a loaded subject. It's never ok to shame someone for trying to express their desires, boundaries, experiences, or sexual health information.

## 3. People change all the time ... So do their boundaries

Sexuality is fluid, which means that sexual preferences, relationships, and boundaries can change. As these changes happen, so do boundaries. Navigating these changes can be difficult, but it becomes a lot easier if you're open and honest with communication. A partner might want to try something new, or stop doing something you've been doing for a long time. They might want to open your relationship up, or they might want to stop being open and start being monogamous. Sometimes, changes happen that result in you or a partner no longer wanting to be in a relationship. Change is inevitable, and it can be challenging, but you can facilitate change in a healthy way by communicating with a partner and doing so consistently.

## 4. Be consistent

Try and make conversations about pleasure and boundaries ongoing. People change all the time, and so do their sexual preferences. Checking in with a partner here and there can help maintain dialogue about healthy sexuality and ensure that everyone is on the same page.

## Part 3: Talking Consent

- Consent means permission. During sexual activity, consent is always necessary.
- Consent can be brought up at any time; before or during sex. You can stop giving or change consent at any time before or during sex.
- Consent is not a one-time thing. It should be enthusiastic and ongoing.
- It's important to pay attention to our sexual partners to make sure consent is maintained. Sometimes a breach of consent is communicated nonverbally or using body language.
- Sexual boundaries are different for everyone and can also change over time. Continuously checking in about boundaries ensures consent is maintained.
- Legally, consent can't be given while you are intoxicated. If you're drunk or high, it might be best to wait for sex until another time where clear consent is possible. If you choose to have sex while drunk or high, it might be best to come up with a plan ahead of time.
- There are also laws that relate to age of consent - meaning the age at which someone is legally allowed to engage in consensual sex. Age of consent and the laws surrounding it vary from place to place.

Consent is when a person gives or receives permission to do something. Consent involves open communication and trust between individuals and is important in all areas of life. During sexual activity, consent is always necessary. Consent should also be ongoing. This means that if you consent to sex,

you can change your mind at any point and decide to slow down or stop. It also means that if you consent to sex with someone once, that it is up to you and you alone to decide if you want to have sex again. Here's a helpful quote to keep in mind:

"[Consent] means being able to say no and having 'no' be accepted and easily respected without pressure to say yes; it means being able to say yes and knowing it doesn't mean you or they have to say yes every time"

source: [http://www.scarleteen.com/article/relationships/be\\_a\\_blabbermouth\\_the\\_whys\\_whats\\_and\\_hows\\_of\\_talking\\_about\\_sex\\_with\\_a\\_partner](http://www.scarleteen.com/article/relationships/be_a_blabbermouth_the_whys_whats_and_hows_of_talking_about_sex_with_a_partner)

Consent is a really important part of healthy sexual communication, but just like pleasure and boundaries, it can be challenging to talk about.

## WHAT TO SAY

Consent can be brought up in a lot of ways. Consent should always be given before you start engaging in any kind of sexual activity. A good rule of thumb is for someone to simply ask for permission for whatever they want to do. Here are some examples of how to ask for consent before sexual activity:

- *I'd really like to kiss you... is that ok?*
- *I think it would be hot if you took your shirt off... can I take it off for you?*
- *I'd like to try going down on you... is that something you want?*

But don't forget, consent also has to be ongoing. In order to make sure consent is maintained, we need to check in with our partners during sex to make sure everything is ok.

Here are some ideas about how to make sure consent is still present during a sexual encounter:

- *Is this okay?*
- *Is there anything you'd like to do differently?*
- *Are you still into this?*
- *Does that feel good?*
- *Do you want to slow down?*
- *Do you want to keep going?*

## WHEN AND WHERE TO ASK

The short answer is, anywhere and always!

Consent should always be given before and during any type of sex. This means that it's our responsibility to ask our sexual partners for consent whenever and wherever sex can happen. If things are moving forward and you want them to continue, always pause and ask first. Just because someone has given you consent for one type of sex DOES NOT mean that you have their consent for anything else.

### TIPS

#### 1. Pay Attention

Consent isn't always just a verbal "yes" or "no." It's often about paying attention to how a sexual partner is feeling and the way they're responding to whatever's going on. Take note of a partner's body language: if they tense up or pull away, STOP what you're doing and check in to see how they're feeling. Chances are it's time to slow things down or stop altogether. Remember: silence or the absence of a verbal "no" DOES NOT mean yes.

## **2. Respect Different and/or Changing Boundaries**

Everyone has different sexual boundaries and these boundaries can shift over time. Every discussion about consent you have will be different. Never assume that because one sexual partner consented to something, that everyone will. Never assume that because you received consent once, that you don't have to ask again.

## **3. Consent Cannot be Given while You or Someone Else is Intoxicated**

Drinking alcohol or taking drugs can alter your ability to make decisions, and affect your sexual desires. Something you or a partner might not normally want to do, or might be careful about, might seem less serious when you're under the influence. When you are intoxicated, it can also affect your ability to give consent. Legally, you cannot consent if you're drunk or high.

## **4. Consent Depends on Age**

In many places, like the United States and Canada, there are laws dictating how old you can be to consent to sex. Age of consent and the laws surrounding it vary from place to place. For instance, in Canada the age of consent is 16, meaning that if you are over 16 you are legally allowed to engage in sex with anyone over the age of consent. In the United States the age is 18. Many countries also have laws around sex for those under the age of consent. Again, these laws vary from place to place (and can also change), so you should do some research of your own.

## **Part 4 - Talking Safe Sex and Sexual Health**

When talking about safer sex, preparation is key. For example, this might mean keeping safer sex supplies close or learning about an STI you need to talk to a sexual partner about.

This guide will explore what, how, where, and when to bring up:

- Using a condom, dental dam, or other type of barrier
- Suggesting you and a partner get tested for STIs
- Disclosing an STI to a partner

Sex is stigmatized. Because of this it can be tough to talk about your sexual health. It's hard not to feel ashamed about your sexual health, but know that it's a normal part of everyone's health.

We should try to be sensitive to different peoples' comfort and sensitivity when it comes to sexual health.

Talking about safe sex and sexual health is essential. It's super important that we communicate clearly with our sexual partners to avoid the risk of STIs or an unwanted pregnancy.

When it comes to conversations about sexual health, thinking about the "what, where, when, and how" can change a lot depending on the aspect of sexual health you're hoping to bring up.

Preparation is key. For example, if you want to ask a sexual partner to put on a [condom or other type of barrier], it might be a good idea to have some nearby. Another example might be if you test positive for an STI, it might be a good idea to practice what you're going to say if you've decided to disclose. In this case, it's helpful to learn some facts about how the STI is treated and where someone can go for a test, which might help your partner feel more at ease. When you're ready to have a conversation about sexual health, even starting with a "Hey, I'd like to talk to you about something. Is this a good time?" can help prepare someone, instead of catching them off guard.

## WHAT TO SAY AND HOW TO SAY IT

No matter what aspect of sexual health you're hoping to discuss, try to communicate your thoughts and feelings in a clear, sensitive, and inclusive manner. This can limit the possibility of confusion or harm for everyone involved. Remember, sex and sexual health can mean a lot of different things to different people - it's important that we consider a partner's emotions and experiences as well as our own. Using "I" statements ensures that what you're trying to say starts with you, and doesn't make any judgements or assumptions about someone else.

Here are some different scenarios where you might talk about safer sex and/or sexual health:

### **You want to use a condom or other type of barrier. You might say:**

- *I'd prefer if you put on a condom, I can put it on for you if you want!*
- *Do you have a dental dam, or should I get one of mine?*
- *I really want you to finger me, but I think it's important that we use gloves.*
- *If neither of us have a condom, maybe we can do something else.*

### **You are with a partner and want both of you to get tested. You might say:**

- *Either of us could have something and not know it, I'd feel more comfortable moving forward if we both got an STI screen.*
- *Just so you know, the last time I was tested was 3 months ago, so I'm about ready for a check-up. How about you?*
- *Let's make a date to get tested, together!*

### **You have an STI and want your partner to get tested or use an appropriate barrier. You might say:**

- *I got some results today and I think we should talk...*
- *Before we have sex, I need to tell you that I have \_\_\_\_\_ but it's totally safe to keep going if we use a \_\_\_\_\_.*
- *I just learned that a partner I was with tested positive for something. I think we should both get tested.*
- *I have a very common STI. I've learned a lot about it and I can hopefully answer any of your questions. If it's ok, can I come with you to get a test?*
- *This is hard for me to tell you, but I want you to know that I have \_\_\_\_\_, and I really hope we can talk more about what this means for us.*

## WHEN AND WHERE TO TALK ABOUT IT

Ideally, any conversation about safe sex and sexual health should happen before engaging in sex. To protect everyone's health, it's important to be clear, open, and honest about what kinds of protection you want to use, if you have any STIs, and/or if you think either one of you should get tested. Yes, conversations about sexual health can feel awkward, but they are also a necessary part of healthy sexual communication and help to build a trusting relationship. If you're feeling nervous, pick a private place where you feel safe and comfortable exploring these topics. It might also be a good idea to have this conversation in a place not normally associated with sex, like in the living room, or during a walk. When we're in spaces that we normally consider sexual, it can be easy to get distracted or uncomfortable.

The timing of when you talk about your sexual health is also important. Here are some different scenarios where you might talk to a sexual partner about safer sex and/or sexual health at different times:



### **You want to use a condom or other type of barrier**

Ideally, talking about methods of protection should happen before any kind of sex. In reality, however, this conversation is often left to the heat of the moment, in which case it's a good idea to prepare something to say AND to have a barrier at the ready. If you've had sex without protection, it's never too late to start. Before you have sex again, engage your partner in a conversation about why safe sex is important to you and ask what they think!

### **You are with a partner and want both of you to get tested**

Again, it might be best to bring this up before you start having sex with someone. But it's never too late to suggest that you and a sexual partner get tested together!

### **You have an STI and want your partner to get tested or use an appropriate barrier**

If you've learned you have an STI, you should try to tell any recent sexual partners as soon as you can, if it's safe to do so. Anyone with whom you've had vaginal, anal, or oral sex may also be at risk of infection. It can feel like there is no "good time" to bring this kind of thing up. Ultimately, it's important that we are open and honest about sexual health – your partner's sexual health is important too. It really boils down to respect for each other's bodies and boundaries. Remember: STIs are a normal part of leading a sexually active lifestyle. So is being open, honest, and mature.

## **TIPS**

### **1. Sex is stigmatized, don't let the stigma get to you**

Unfortunately, there is a lot of stigma around sex and STIs in our society. This is especially true about sex among young and/or LGBTQ+ people. Sometimes people can get pretty upset when you share information about an STI result, and this can feel really hurtful. Remember, STIs are a normal part of everyone's health, and does not define you. Most STIs are easily detected and treated, and shouldn't be a cause for panic. Anyone who shames you for exploring your sexuality might not be someone you want to be with in the future. If anything, your maturity and honesty in choosing to discuss your STI should indicate to a partner that you care about their sexual health. If they can't see that, it might be time to move on.

### **2. Be sensitive to a sexual partner's reaction**

On the other hand, everyone experiences sex and sexual health in a unique way and with varying levels of comfort. Talking about sex and sexual health can sometimes bring up a partner's insecurities or make them feel uncomfortable or anxious. If you are disclosing an STI result to a partner and they seem a little uneasy, try to respect their feelings and reassure them that you are here with them. Learning some facts about how an STI is tested for and treated can help ease this process. Offer to go with them to get tested. Let them know that you are telling them about your result because you care about their health and the trust you share.

### **3. Own your sexual health**

It is your right to explore your sexuality in a manner that is safe, consensual, and healthy. If that means using protection or a barrier, your partner should respect your decision. If that means getting tested each time you start having sex with a new partner, the same goes. If a person refuses or gets defensive when you bring it up... it might be a sign that they're not right for you.