

Asking Sexual History Questions: How to Begin

1. SET THE STAGE:

- The sexual history can come up naturally when talking with a patient as part of the social history. It can also be asked in relation to their past medical history or history of reproductive health.
- Before starting, you can let the patient know that you ask sexual history questions of all patients every year as part of their routine care. You can use a statement such as:
 - I am going to ask you a few questions about your sexual history. I ask these questions at least once a year of all my patients because they are very important for your overall health. Everything you tell me is confidential. Do you have any questions before we start?
- If patients want to know why you need to ask these questions, and why they are important to their health, you can use statements such as:
 - Your sexual health is important for your overall emotional and physical health.
 - We ask these questions every year because it is common for people's sexual behaviours and partners to change over time.
 - As you may know, sexual activity without protection can lead to sexually transmitted diseases. These kinds of diseases are very common and often there is no way for you to tell you have them. If we don't catch and treat these diseases, you can become unwell.
 - These questions can also help guide a conversation about ways to protect yourself from sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancy, or other things that may concern you. It will also give you an opportunity to talk about problems with, or changes, in sexual desire and functioning.
- If the patient declines to complete a sexual history with you, ask if there is another member of the clinical care team with whom they might be more comfortable. If they have already provided this information to someone else (e.g., social worker or mental health nurse), ask for their permission to obtain the information if appropriate.
- Be straightforward, but sensitive and open to different behaviours.

2. ASK THREE SCREENING QUESTIONS:

- Have you been sexually active in the past year?
- Do you have sex with men only, women only, or both? (If both, ask the next question twice—once for male partners, and once for female partners.)
- How many people have you had sex with in the past year?

3. DETERMINE IF THE PATIENT NEEDS A MORE DETAILED RISK ASSESSMENT:

- In general, patients with multiple sex partners, and male patients who have sex with men, should be asked additional questions to assess their risk for HIV and STDs.
- If a patient reports only one partner, ask if this is a casual or long-term partner, and if the patient knows if their partner is having sex with other people. Questions about the use of protection, history of STDs, and other risk factors may still be needed for these patients.
- If a patient has not been sexually active in the past year, but this is the first time you have taken their sexual history, ask if they've ever been sexually active, the gender of their past partners, and how many partners they have had. Again, you may wish to do further screening questions about protection, relationship to partners, etc.
- All patients, regardless of sexual history, can be asked whether or not they have any concerns about keeping themselves sexually safe and healthy.
- Although these questions are brief, it is important for providers, or other members of the clinical care team, to recognize that a sexual history will, in some situations, lead to a longer discussion of important sexual health and related issues.

Adapted from National Association of Community Health Centers (2015)