

# Talking about sexual health

## A tool for workers



Talking about sex, sexuality and sexual health with clients is an important area of practice. By using your existing skills and experience in building trust and rapport, you can become a safe and trusted source of sexual health information and support.

### Before you start...

**Make sure the client knows about the confidentiality policies of your service by:**

- having posters visibly displayed
- talking openly about confidentiality
- providing a safe space to chat

**Have an open mind and take a respectful, non-judgemental approach. Leave prejudices at the door.**

**Spend some time actively planning how you will make your approach as trauma informed as possible.**

**Be authentic, use everyday language and terminology that clients understand and are likely to relate to.**

### Remember...

It's not about having all the answers. Instead, the focus is on understanding a client's thoughts, concerns, challenges and strengths; supporting them to make informed choices; and helping them access the right sexual health support.

Look for opportunities to start a conversation on what a client is already asking or talking about.

## 1 Permission

Establish rapport before asking sensitive questions and begin by asking permission – it shows respect and helps the client feel safe.

*Before we move on, is it okay with you if we talk a little bit more about that relationship/situation you mentioned?*

*I know we've been talking a lot about substance use, but I'm also curious about how it might be affecting other parts of your life, such as relationships and taking care of your sexual health. Do you mind if we chat about those things for a bit?*

## 2 Open the conversation

Ask the client what they already know and build on the conversation. Listen to the client, let them co-direct the conversation, and leave space for them to talk about their experiences.

*Can you tell me what you already know about...? (e.g sexual health/consent/condoms/STIs)?*

*What comes to mind when you hear the words 'safe sex'?*

## 3 Information

Acknowledge what the client knows and build on their existing knowledge. Correct misconceptions, offer information that's relevant and addresses their concerns. Check-in regularly to ensure the person understands you.

*What do you think about...? (Safer sex harm minimisation strategy)*

*...Is this something you reckon you might try?...If no, what are some reasons why you wouldn't be so keen on trying it?*

*Having an STI test is usually quick and easy. While a nurse or doctor might ask about your drug use during a sexual health check-up, they won't test for them and won't report use to anyone else.*

## 4 Resources

Direct the client to where they can find more information, resources and support to meet their needs.

*I have some more resources about this you can take with you if you'd like. Would this interest you?*

## 5 Referral

Explore ways to address any barriers to accessing sexual health care and ideally facilitate a warm referral to a service that is right for them.

*Do you have a doctor you've seen before? How would you feel about talking with them about what we've spoken about? There is a service nearby that offers free sexual health check-ups. If you're interested, I could help you make an appointment?*

# Key sexual health messages



## Identity and relationships

- When it comes to sexuality, gender, attraction and identity, no two people are exactly the same. Diversity is to be celebrated and supported.
- Consent can be given and taken away at any time.
- People have the right to make their own decisions about sex.



## STI transmission

- STIs can be passed on through unprotected sexual contact, including oral, anal and vaginal sex
- Some STIs can be passed to from mother to baby during pregnancy and/or birth.



## Symptoms

- Most STIs don't have symptoms – the only way to know is through testing.
- Even when asymptomatic, untreated STIs can still be passed on to others and cause health problems.



## Testing

- STI testing is quick, easy and usually free with Medicare.
- Testing is usually done via a urine sample, however, it can also be done through a swab or a blood test
- Most STIs are easily treated or can be managed effectively, especially if diagnosed early.
- People should be tested for STIs when they change partners or at least every year, even if they have no symptoms.



## Prevention

- Condoms/dams offer the best protection against STIs and unplanned pregnancies.
- Taking PrEP, maintaining an undetectable viral load, and using new injecting equipment can help reduce the risk of HIV transmission.

## Remember...

- It doesn't have to be complicated – you can be brief!
- It doesn't have to be embarrassing – remember it's not about you! By modelling confidence, you can support clients to have these conversations free from shame.
- Don't know the answers? That's OK – you don't have to be an expert. You can search for the answers together with your client.
- You might be the only person who asks, or who the client feels they can talk to. Don't wait for them to bring it up.