

Be on the team to support the health of your teen

By Teddi Dineley Johnson

The first kiss. Making the team. Driver's ed. Not making the team. Fun and friendship. Fitting in. Homework.

The teen years are fleeting and precious. And, along with other important aspects of adolescence, health must figure prominently in a well-rounded transition to adulthood.

"The teen years are happy, but also stressful," says Margaret Blythe, MD, chair of the Committee on Adolescence at the American Academy of Pediatrics. "They are rewarding years, but also a balancing act for both the parent and the child. It's an ongoing process to hold on and let go."

In the meantime, parents of teens can take comfort: The road to a healthy adulthood is well traveled and paved with healthy advice.

By the time they graduate from high school, more than 70 percent of teens have used alcohol at least once, and 34 percent of eighth-graders report having had a drink in the past year.

NO THANKS Start talking to your teen early about the dangers of underage drinking. Make it clear that drinking when younger than 21 is against the law, and that the legal consequences could jeopardize their future in terms of not getting their license and having a record. And let them know that drinking can come with tragic consequences: More than 5,000 people younger

than 21 die as a result of drinking alcohol every year in the United States. Also, studies show that drinking alcohol can harm the growing body and brain.

If your teen does get into a situation where drinking has occurred, you want them to be safe and not drive while drinking or be a passenger in a car in which the driver has been drinking.

"Always let them know you are available, if they get in that situation, to come and get them," Blythe says.

You never know when your teen will feel the urge to dish. Realize that teens are often ready to talk and communicate with you at times

SAY WHAT? when you are not necessarily ready. In fact, many parents of teens report that simple car rides — such as when they drive their teen to school or to a friend's house — seem to spark conversation with mom and dad.

"You just have to take it when they are ready to give it to you," Blythe says. "And it may be an inopportune time for you, but it may be the most opportune time you'll have."

By the way, you should always know where your teens are supposed to be. Meet their friends and provide the opportunity for them to have friends over and feel comfortable. And don't always be suspicious. Give them a sense of trust, unless they do something to lose your trust. Also, express a sense of confidence that they will make the right decisions.

Preventive health care is important during the teen years. Visits with a health care provider can help promote good health behaviors and discourage damaging behaviors that can affect teens' health for the rest of their lives. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that teens have a physical at least once a year. Don't forget to ask your child's doctor about any immunizations that need updating.

GET AHEAD



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But be sure to give your teen some space with the doctor.

"This is a time frame when parents should expect that there are visits with the doctor alone," Blythe says. "The doctor will want to spend one-on-one time with the teen."

Stress is a big issue among teens. From school to activities to friends and family, the teen years can be stressful. But they also are a time when teens need to learn to handle stress, Blythe says.

Parents should remain tuned in. Signs that your teen might be truly overwhelmed include a drop in grades; withdrawal from activities, friends or family; constant headaches; stomachaches and irritability.

Teens should get at least 30 minutes of exercise three times a week, but five times a week is even better. Whether your teen plays sports, swims laps, jumps rope, is enrolled in exercise classes, or just takes PE class in school, any moderately strenuous movement is good.

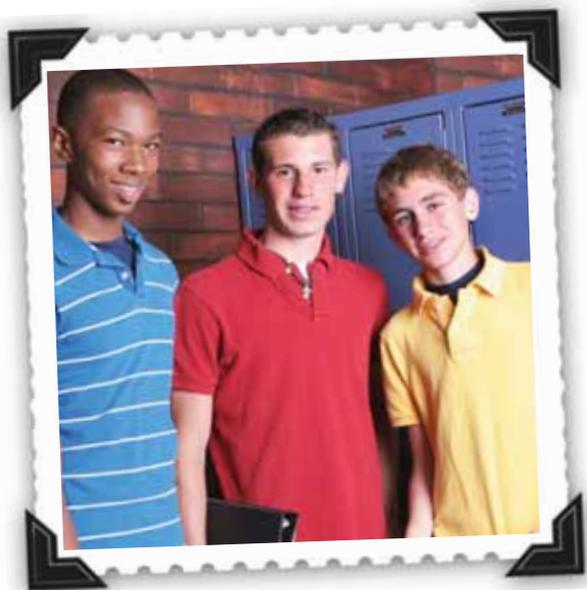
And don't forget to remind your teens to wear a helmet specific to their sport.

The teen years are also a time when good nutrition can make the difference between a passing grade and a failing grade.

Smart eating habits in adolescence lower the risk for diseases such as diabetes, asthma, heart disease and some forms of cancer. Serve healthy foods at home, starting with breakfast. According to the National Institutes of Health, eating a healthy breakfast can increase teens' attention span and memory, give them more energy and help them feel less irritable and restless.

>> For more teen health tips, visit www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/az/

BE FIT



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