

# HEALTH EDUCATION

Answering questions commonly asked about sex  
education by secondary students

A Teacher's Guide

# A Guide for Teachers

## Answering Commonly Asked Questions about Sex Education

A student's sex education comes from a range of sources, including their parents, teachers, friends, and media. Teachers are often asked questions during class, before or after school, or between class time. In sex education instruction, it may be challenging to respond appropriately to questions from students. In considering responses, teachers must keep in mind Utah law and policy, as well as local education agency (LEA) guidelines. LEA is a term that describes local school districts and charter schools. This document is a guide to answering commonly asked questions. Teachers need to remember that if they are uncomfortable with a question, they are not *required* to respond.

Utah Law: Teachers may respond to spontaneous student questions for the purposes of providing medically accurate data or correcting inaccurate or misleading information or comments made by students in class.

Utah law prohibits teachers from answering questions concerning sexual techniques, including intricacies of sexual stimulation or erotic behavior. Some LEAs may place additional restrictions on what may and may not be answered, and teachers must have a clear understanding of LEA policy regulating sex education instruction.

Utah Code: [53G-10-402](#)

Utah Administrative Code: [R277-474](#)

## Types of Questions

### **Factual Information**

If you know the answer, provide the information within Utah law, LEA and Utah Core guidelines. There is nothing wrong with teachers stating they do not know, that they will have to check resources, or that they are prohibited by state law from providing a response to a particular question. Teachers may also refer students to textbooks, glossaries, and specific websites and/or community resources that they have previewed and have been approved by the LEA.

### **Physical and Emotional Changes**

Students at all school levels may have questions about physical and emotional changes they or others are experiencing during puberty and maturation. Students need to be comfortable about discussing these changes, and teachers need to indicate that the questions are common among adolescents. If the questions are concerned with values, refer the student to parents or guardians, clergy, counselors, or local community resources.

### **Validating Activities/Behaviors**

Students may seek validation/approval for certain behaviors or activities affecting their sexuality. They may ask whether a teacher considers a behavior/activity okay, or whether the teacher experienced the same thing when he/she was younger. They may also ask whether something is normal and common for most adolescents.

In response, avoid using the term *“normal,”* as this will vary from one value system to another. Present medically accurate information addressing legal issues, risk factors, and consequences of behaviors students may be suggesting. Reinforce the value of asking questions as a means to learn about making healthy decisions and keep responses as brief and concise as possible. Teachers should never include personal biases or past experiences.

## **Tips for Educators**

1. Be open, nonjudgmental, and kind when answering questions. Remember, it can take a lot of courage to ask a question.
2. Be factual and when possible, give positive messages. Being factual, positive, and non-judgmental gives people the information they need and supports the development of personal values, self-esteem, effective communication, and good decision-making skills.
3. You do not have to know all the answers. It is okay to say, “I don’t know, but I will find out for you.”
4. It is okay to feel embarrassed. If you feel embarrassed, say, “I feel a little embarrassed about your question; your question is a really good one.” Ensure your embarrassment does not give the impression they did something wrong by asking the question.

5. It is okay to answer later. If you do not know how to answer the question, it is okay to say, “Great question, but I need some time to figure out how to answer that question. I will get back to you soon.” (It’s also a good segue into a discussion of public vs. private)
6. Stick to facts and medically accurate information. When you give the facts, you aren’t imposing your values. Utah law requires only factual, medically accurate, and unbiased information be taught.

## Guidance for Teaching Students with Cognitive Disabilities

Students with cognitive disabilities require maturation and sex education that:

- Covers age-appropriate issues that may be associated with their particular disability.
- Explains social rules, such as telling the difference between private and public behaviors.
- Delivers information in a way that a person with a cognitive disability can understand, using appropriate modifications and accommodations.
- Teaches body safety skills such as naming body parts correctly, teaching some body parts are private, how to report abuse, and discourage secret keeping.
- Teaches good hygiene and how bodies change during puberty (i.e., body odor, menstruation, erections, ejaculation).

It is important for parents and guardians to have access to the information they need to support the student in dealing with particular challenges they may face.

Data shows that people with disabilities are more likely to experience all forms of abuse, including sexual abuse. This abuse is also less likely to be reported. Teachers can model assertive behavior and explain personal boundaries.

## General Guidelines for Answering Questions

1. Establish and reinforce ground rules with class. These may include:
  - Teachers are not at liberty to answer all questions. Some questions may not be answered because they are either inappropriate or do not meet the state, or LEA guidelines.



- Questions must be within Utah law and LEA guidelines (review parent consent form with students).
  - Questions must be asked and answered using medically accurate terminology – no street slang.
  - Technique or “how to” questions will not be answered.
  - Students may not ask questions about the teacher’s personal experiences.
  - Ridiculing or making fun of students who ask questions is not allowed.
  - Allow students to participate in other rules or agreements.
2. Precede responses with phrases that help students feel at ease and encourage class discussion. Examples are:
- “Many students probably wonder about this...”
  - “Thank you for asking this very relevant question...”
  - “I appreciate your question. Can you tell me a little more so I can provide a complete answer?”
  - That’s a good question, but I am not permitted to answer. Your parents or your counselor might be able to provide that information to you.”
3. When answering factual questions, make sure you are:
- Providing medically accurate information.
  - Within the Core Standards, Utah State law, and LEA guidelines.
  - Considering the age/maturity level of your students.
  - Objective, brief, and concise in your response.
4. For answers to questions that might cause embarrassment, consider the following introductions:
- “Many times, adults as well as students are embarrassed by questions like this, but it is important to discuss...”
  - “I feel a bit uncomfortable with this question and do not feel I can answer it for you.”
5. For answers to value questions (right or wrong), consider the following responses:
- “This is a question concerning values that vary from person to person or group to group depending on personal background.”

- “Consult your parents, guardians, or other trusted adults for an answer to this question.”

## Commonly Asked Questions and Responses

The following questions have been frequently asked of teachers in Utah classrooms. Answers are italicized.

### Diseases

1. What is the difference between sexually transmitted disease (STD) and sexually transmitted infection (STI)? *Sexually transmitted disease (STD) and sexually transmitted infection) are two terms that often mean the same thing, but the “D” stands for disease”, while the “I” stands for infection. Medically, infections are only called diseases when they cause symptoms, and many STIs don’t have symptoms.*
2. From what body fluids can you get Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)? *Blood, semen, pre-ejaculate or pre-seminal fluids, vaginal fluids, anal/rectal fluids, and breast milk are the fluids from which someone can contract HIV.*
3. Will the use of a condom prevent sexually transmitted diseases or infections? *Abstinence is the only 100% sure method of preventing STDs and STIs. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) has indicated that both external and internal condoms can offer protection against sexually transmitted diseases and infections. The effectiveness of condoms is dependent on correct and consistent condom use.*
4. How do you know if you have an STD or STI? *Most people with an STI will remain asymptomatic. STIs may present symptoms, but many symptoms will not be visible. The common symptoms of STIs resemble other types of infections, including urinary tract infections and yeast infections. STI testing is the only way to find out if a person has an STI. If someone tests positive, treatment is available to either cure or manage the STI*
5. Can herpes be passed by having oral sex? *Yes, oral and genital herpes can be contracted through kissing or oral sex, and there is no cure.*
6. Can you get an STD or STI if you have never had sex? *Most STDs and STIs are transmitted by having vaginal, oral, or anal sex, and engaging in other sexual or intimate behaviors that involve genital skin-to-skin contact. Other STIs are spread through infected blood on hypodermic needles, pregnancy, and childbirth.*



7. Can you get an STD or STI if you only have oral sex? *Yes, many STDs and STIs can be transmitted by giving or receiving oral sex.*
8. Are STD's and STIs different for males and for females? *No, the same sexually transmitted infections are contractable by all sexes, but the symptoms and available STI test options may differ. Especially in females, some STDs or STIs show no symptoms at all.*
9. How do lesbians get STIs, including HIV? *STI transmission is the same for all people, including lesbians. STIs can be contracted through certain bodily fluids and genital contact through vaginal, oral, and anal sex and other sexual activities with a person who has an STI..*
10. I have heard that people can get HIV from getting tattoos or body piercings. Is this true? *HIV and Hepatitis B or C can be contracted from body piercing or tattooing if the instruments from the procedures are not sterilized or disinfected between clients.*
11. Is it possible to get an STD or STI from a toilet seat in a public restroom? *This is highly unlikely, as most STDs and STIs are spread through fluid exchange or by the use of contaminated needles.*
12. Can I get an STD or STI from kissing? *In open mouth kissing it is possible, but not probable. If your partner's mouth is infected with an STD or STI, he or she may be able to pass the infection to your mouth if you have an open sore.*

### **Menstruation**

1. Why is there bleeding when a female is on her period? *During the menstrual cycle, the lining of the uterus prepares for a pregnancy. The lining will shed if pregnancy doesn't happen resulting in bleeding through the vagina.*
2. I have heard that tampons can be dangerous to use. Are they? *Menstrual products help absorb or collect menstrual fluid during a period. If a tampon is the best option for you, Package instructions should be followed carefully. Using a tampon incorrectly can cause a rare but serious condition called Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS).*
3. Can a female get pregnant while she is on her period? *Yes, a pregnancy can occur anytime sperm from semen or pre-seminal fluid gets in the vagina, even while menstruating.*

4. Can you lose your virginity by using a tampon? *People define virginity in different ways, but most define a virgin as one who has never had sexual intercourse. Using this definition, you cannot lose your virginity by using a tampon.*
5. Is it true that you cannot get an STD or STI if you have sex during your period? *No, you can get an STD or STI any time you have sex with an infected person. Abstinence is the only true preventative measure.*
6. If my friend has missed her period and thinks she is pregnant, what should she do? *Your friend needs to talk with her parents or guardians. If this is not possible, she can talk to a school counselor or another trusted adult who can assist her in arranging to talk with her parents.*

### **Puberty**

1. Is it normal for a male to have swollen breasts, sometimes with discharge? *This is a common happening during puberty, almost 50% of all males will experience swollen breasts with or without a discharge fluid. It will go away over time and is not something unusual or to be worried about.*
2. Is there a purpose for pubic hair? *Hair helps to protect our bodies and regulate body temperature.*
3. When do females' breasts start to develop? *This is a common concern for females. Usually, breasts start to develop somewhere between the ages of 8 and 16. You should not compare yourself with others, as there is no set schedule for breast development.*
4. What is a wet dream? *A wet dream is an involuntary release of semen during sleep. It is more formally referred to as a nocturnal emission and is common among males during puberty.*
5. What is an erection? *It is when the penis becomes engorged with blood.*

### **Sex**

1. Can females get pregnant if they have sex standing up? *Females can become pregnant regardless of the position or the location they are in when they have sexual intercourse.*
2. What is oral and anal sex? *Oral sex is mouth to genital or mouth to anus contact; anal sex is penis to anus contact.*



3. Is oral or anal sex really sex? *Yes, they both involve contact with the genitals and are modes of transporting sexually transmitted diseases or infections.*
4. Can a female become pregnant without penetration? *Yes, seminal fluid and pre-seminal fluid containing sperm can enter the vagina without penetration.*
5. Can people with a disability get pregnant? *Any female who has sexual intercourse can get pregnant, regardless of cognitive ability. A male who has sexual intercourse can father a child, regardless of cognitive ability.*
6. Can a female become pregnant if she only has anal intercourse? *The only way a female can become pregnant from anal intercourse is when any sperm comes in contact with the vagina. STD's and STI's can be spread through anal intercourse.*
7. What is a cherry? *"Cherry" is a slang or street term for the hymen, a thin fold of skin that goes across the vaginal opening that is usually present at birth.*
8. How do you put on a condom? *This is a technique, or how to, question and I am not permitted to answer. Please refer to parent or caregiver, and the package instructions for effective condom use.*
9. Can you get pregnant from having oral sex? *No, but you can transmit or receive STDs or STIs.*
10. Will I be a better lover if I have more partners? *No, the more partners you have the more you are putting yourself and your partners at risk of STD or STI.*
11. If I use two condoms, will I be better protected against HIV and other STDs or STIs? *No, they produce friction which can cause them to break. Refer to the package instructions for proper use.*
12. What is "blue balls"? *"Blue balls" is a slang term for male arousal without ejaculation. It sometimes causes temporary pain due to constricted blood vessels that naturally goes away with time.*
13. What is an orgasm? *An orgasm is a series of contractions of the pelvic muscles occurring at the peak of sexual arousal.*
14. How do people who are gay have sex? *This is a technique question and cannot be discussed. A person's sexual orientation does not determine how they have sex. As*

*with heterosexual couples, intimate behaviors shared by homosexual couples need not be discussed.*

15. Is masturbation dangerous or bad? *There is no scientific evidence that masturbation is dangerous. In some communities, some families, or religions, masturbation is labeled as morally wrong or "bad". What might be right or acceptable for one person is not necessarily right or acceptable for another. It is important to accept the personal values and boundaries of others.*
16. I hear less and less about acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). Is there an AIDS vaccination to protect people? *No, there is no vaccination from HIV. However, there is medication, in the form of pills or an injection, that can protect a person from HIV. If a person tests positive for HIV, there are medications that have been developed to manage the infection and prevent a person from progressing to AIDS. These medications can also reduce the amount of HIV in the blood to a low level where it is undetectable and cannot be transmitted.*
17. Isn't AIDS a gay disease? *No. AIDS has always affected people of all sexual orientations. HIV/AIDS is currently growing fastest in the heterosexual populations and is affecting the 18-25 age group the most.*
18. How do people masturbate? *This is a technique question that I am not permitted to answer.*
19. What is date rape? *Date rape is when someone you know or have gone out with has sexual intercourse with you against your will.*
20. If a male ejaculates over a female's underwear or over her clothing, can she become pregnant? *It is less likely than with penetration, but anytime sperm gets near a female's genitals there is a chance she can become pregnant or be exposed to STDs or STIs.*
21. What is "plan B one step" or the "morning after pill", and how does it work? *This medication is sometimes called emergency contraception. There is an over-the-counter version and a prescription version (ELLA, which may be more effective). It is a medication to stop the release of an egg from the ovary. It may prevent sperm from fertilizing the egg. If fertilization does occur, this medication may prevent a fertilized egg from attaching to the uterus. The medication works best the sooner it is taken, it can be taken up to five (5) days after unprotected or unwanted intercourse to*

*prevent pregnancy. It is more effective for people who weigh less than 165 lbs. It offers no protection from STDs or STIs. It is not an abortion pill and will not terminate a pregnancy.*

22. *Can drinking alcohol during pregnancy harm a baby? Yes, drinking alcohol or using other substances puts a baby at risk for Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS), which may cause brain damage and numerous other birth defects.*
23. *How do you define sex? Sex may include more than sexual intercourse. It can include intimate genital contact and sexual touching, oral, and anal sex.*
24. *What is a dental dam? A dental dam is a piece of latex used for dental procedures. Some people also use it as STD/STI preventative with oral sex (mouth to vagina or anus contact).*
25. *Can I still be a virgin if I only have oral or anal sex? People define virginity in different ways, but most define a virgin as one who has never had sexual intercourse. Sexual abstinence is defined as no sexual contact (e.g., oral, anal, or vaginal sex, intimate genital contact, and sexual touching). Please remember oral or anal sex still put you at risk for STDs and STIs, including HIV.*
26. *What is the most effective method of birth control? Abstinence is the only 100% effective method of birth control. All others fail to some extent.*
27. *I heard that I can just buy birth control at the pharmacy or online, is that true? In 2024, the FDA approved the hormone oral contraceptive Opill® as a non-prescription daily oral birth control pill.*
28. *Did you have sex before you were married? I'm sorry, but as I indicated in the ground rules, I do not answer questions about my personal experiences.*
29. *Can I become sterile from masturbating? There is no evidence of this.*
30. *What is masturbation? It is self-stimulation of the genitals.*
31. *What is an abortion? The termination of pregnancy by various means, including medical surgery, before the fetus is able to sustain independent life.*

## Healthy Relationships and Relationship Violence

1. What are some elements of a healthy relationship? *Healthy relationships all depend on a few key elements: healthy communication, healthy boundaries, mutual respect, and support for one another.*
2. Why are refusal skills, affirmative consent, and personal boundaries important? *These are all important to establish healthy relationships of all kinds for lifelong wellness and happiness. Being able to communicate your comfort level as well as likes and dislikes with various activities is critical for life-long health relationships.*
3. What is affirmative consent: *Affirmative consent is a voluntary, affirmative, conscious, agreement to engage in an activity that can be revoked at any time, a previous relationship does not constitute consent, and coercion or threat of force can also not be used to establish consent. This may or may not be sexual in nature, affirmative consent can be for any social interactions.*
4. What is the difference between refusal skills and affirmative consent? *Refusal skills are skills to teach the ability to clearly and expressly refuse sexual advances, recognize the obligation to stop the sexual advances if refused by another individual's behavior, and the right to report and seek counseling for unwanted sexual advances. Affirmative consent differs in that it is based on skills to agree to engage in behaviors. These behaviors could be going on a date, holding hands, kissing, or other mutually agreed upon activities. Both refusal skills and affirmative consent rely on setting personal boundaries and communication.*
5. Are there times or situations when a person cannot consent to sexual activity? *Yes, people under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol (voluntary or involuntary) can never give consent. Consent cannot be given in situations involving coercion, threats, intimidation, or physical force. Also, consent cannot be given in situations when the person is unable to consent due to cognitive disability, or other situations where there may be a power difference such as age, status, or position.*
6. Can people with a cognitive disability consent to sexual activity? *Individuals with cognitive disabilities related to illness or disability can still consent to sex but*

*deserve special consideration. The individual must have knowledge, rationality, and voluntariness with respect to the decision to engage in specific sexual activity.*

7. Can you change your mind after you have consented to sex? *It is okay to change your mind about sexual behavior or activity at any time during the activity, even if you have already agreed to something.*
8. What is sexual harassment: *Sexual harassment is the making of unwanted sexual advances or obscene remarks.*
9. What is considered sexual assault? *Sexual assault is defined as offenses against someone without their consent. Sexual offenses may include forcible sexual intercourse or attempted forcible sexual intercourse.*
10. How do I report a sexual assault? *The state of Utah requires any person who believes that sexual assault has occurred report the abuse to a law enforcement agency or the Division of Child and Family Services.*
11. What does relationship violence mean? *Relationship violence includes physical, emotional, verbal and sexual violence to an acquaintance, partner, family member, or spouse.*
12. What are some signs of dating abuse? *Dating abuse is a pattern of coercive, intimidating, or manipulative behaviors used to exert power and control over a partner. Some examples are:*
  - a. *Checking your phone, email, or social media accounts without your permission*
  - b. *Putting you down frequently, especially in front of others.*
  - c. *Extreme jealousy or insecurity.*
  - d. *Isolating you from friends or family (physically, financially, or emotionally).*
  - e. *Any form of physical harm.*
  - f. *Pressuring you or forcing you to have sex.*
13. What is rape? *As defined in Utah code 76-5-402, a person commits rape when the actor has sexual intercourse with another person without the victim's consent. This section applies whether or not the actor is married to the victim.*



14. I put myself in a bad situation and was assaulted, is it my fault? *Rape and sexual assault are never the fault of the victim. The only person at fault is the abuser.*
15. What kind of help is available to someone who has experienced sexual assault? *First, the person should report the assault to law enforcement or school staff who can help connect the person to help. The person should also be encouraged to seek medical treatment right away. Law enforcement, school staff, and medical professionals all must keep the person's information confidential. There are also great resources for victims such as:*  
<https://www.ucasa.org/resources> and  
<https://www.raperecoverycenter.org/if-you-have-been-assaulted>

\* Educators should review the above resources prior to teaching Standard HI.HD.9 and HII.HD.9