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Supporting Teen Privacy

Adolescent visits to the doctor are much different from examinations for younger children. We respect that teens often have a special need for privacy and may have health questions that they would like to discuss alone. Therefore, during adolescent physicals (age thirteen years and older), we like to provide teens with the opportunity to meet with the doctor without their parent present. As health care providers, we are ethically bound to keep information private as requested by our teenage patients. There are limitations to this privacy, however. If we are ever worried for the immediate health and safety of any teenager, we will notify their parent or guardian.

During the annual physical, a parent will usually accompany a teen to the exam room to meet with the doctor or nurse practitioner for the initial part of the visit. This is the time when parents may ask any questions of special concern about their teen's health. Parents then return to the waiting room while the teen finishes their discussion and physical examination with the provider. This period of time is very important for teenagers, as young adults, to learn to communicate independently about health concerns with the doctor or nurse practitioner.

All the physicians and nurse practitioners at Northampton Area Pediatrics support and encourage open communication between teenagers and their parents. A parent knows their child better than anyone else, and will set the guiding rules and principles on their path to adulthood. But we also view ourselves as having a role in educating and helping teens make healthy choices for themselves. Topics covered in teen visits include interests and activities, home life, school performance, dating, sex and sexuality (including abstinence and safer sex, and/or concerns around gender), substance use or experimentation, and issues around stress, moods or anxiety. These topics are discussed universally, and we make no pre-judgments about a particular teen's involvement (or not) with any of the above.

We also universally perform Chlamydia testing on teenage girls beginning at age 15 years. Screening is recommended by the CDC in all sexually active teen girls and young women. The test is performed on a urine sample that is sent to the labs. Screening is recommended since females with Chlamydia often have no symptoms of infection. Teenage boys are tested as needed based upon symptoms.

We encourage all parents to have ongoing discussions of the above topics with their teenage children. It may feel uncomfortable, but gets easier with time, and the communication is appreciated.

Once a teenager turns 18 years old, he or she is now legally an adult and we are bound by law to keep all medical encounters confidential. We still encourage openness between parents and children and ask that adult patients of ours complete a "release of medical information" form so that we can continue to share information, in a limited way, with parents.

