

- TIPS for HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

Porn is the kind of topic you might feel uncomfortable discussing with your patients. But feeling able to discuss sex and relationships and related subjects, such as porn, will help you provide holistic care and help uncover any potential concerns, either physical or psychological.

- 1 Don't avoid it.** It can be tempting to avoid asking questions because you're afraid of the answers. But you don't need to solve everything yourself. There are referral pathways you can use, and available resources you can signpost to: for example, there are condoms with local anaesthetic gel in the tips available for people with premature ejaculation.
- 2 Treat everybody the same.** Ask everybody questions about sex, not just certain demographic groups. If you ask older people, "When you have sex, is it comfortable and okay for you?" you'll be surprised what you can uncover. Vaginal dryness is a common menopausal problem, and lack of erection can be an early warning sign of heart disease.
- 3 Take your lead from them.** If someone clearly wants to say something but is embarrassed, you could say: "It feels there might be something you want to talk to me about." But take your cue from the patient about when to stop the questions. By addressing the issue and not pushing it, you'll leave the door open for them returning to talk another time.
- 4 Explain why you're asking.** Sometimes the way that you ask questions can make all the difference. For example you could say: "This is a question I ask everybody". Or: "sometimes people who take this medication find that..."
- 5 Be open minded.** Being prepared to discuss porn in a non-judgemental way is important. One of the biggest barriers to effective communication about difficult topics can be your own feelings about the topic. Think about how you might approach the subject and consider chatting with colleagues about what they think and how they approach it.
- 6 Don't make assumptions.** Instead of saying "I'm sure you're sensible and use condoms, don't you?" use open questions, like "When you last had sex, did you use a condom?" Motivational questions can be a good technique for this, for example, "Out of the last 10 times you had sex, how many times did you use a condom?" This helps you find a true picture of their situation, and what information or advice could be most appropriate.
- 7 Explore the issue.** If a patient is concerned about a sexual issue, for example not feeling able to control how often they're looking at porn, you could refer them to psychosexual services. But first, find out how much of a problem it is to the patient. When did it start? How much is it affecting their life or relationships?
- 8 Reassure them there's no 'normal'.** Patients often have concerns about what their genitals look like. If they ask you about this, you might want to offer to have a look (always offer a chaperone), or it might come up when you're already doing a genital examination. For anyone with a vulva, you could refer them to the Great Wall of Vagina: greatwallofvagina.co.uk
- 9 Use resources.** If someone has any issue related to sex, you can print off the appropriate information sheet from the Sexual Advice Association's website and go through it with them: sexualadviceassociation.co.uk
- 10 Be aware of consent.** If you're asking about sex, especially with young people, then you need to be aware of safeguarding concerns. Follow your local referral pathways. As part of a consultation you could ask patients, "When did you last have sex?", "Was that sex that you wanted and agreed to?" and "Could you say no to sex that you didn't want?"

Did you know?

Talking about porn...might not be directly about porn

Some patients might ask you directly about porn, particularly if they have any worries about how they're using porn, or how it's affecting their relationships or the sex they're having.

Patients may also have broader questions about their body, sexual dysfunction, sexual activity, sexual wellbeing and happiness, or psychosexual problems.

Whether porn plays a role in your patient's lives or not, being able to talk honestly about sex and relationships, and to encourage your patients to share any concerns is a skill well worth having.

Resources

Sexual Advice Association

sexualadviceassociation.co.uk/factsheets

The website has lots of useful patient information factsheets on a variety of topics and concerns.

Great Wall of Vagina

greatwallofvagina.co.uk

An art installation featuring plaster casts of 400 different vulvas of people aged 18-76, showing that vulvas and labia are as different and unique as faces.

Training courses

fpa.org.uk/training

Attend some really good training, such as FPA's Young People, Sexuality and the Digital World or Chance, Choice and Consequences. FPA can also provide training on sex and the law.

The Law on Sex

fpa.org.uk/factsheets/law-on-sex

FPA's factsheet provides some background information and context on laws around sex

Primary Care Women's Health Forum

pcwhf.co.uk

A forum for healthcare professionals across the UK caring for female patients.

DO... relationships and sex education resources

dosreforschools.com/resources-for-teachers/before-the-classroom-reflective-preparation

Although primarily aimed at teachers, some of the resources produced by the DO... project could be helpful. For example, this self-reflection exercise can help you feel more comfortable in your approach to talking about sex and relationships.