**Teen Hygiene Tips**

As a parent, it’s your job to help your kids and explain the teen hygiene basics. But where do you start? How good is your teen's hygiene? Let his or her shoes be your guide. "A lot of teens really have that sweaty sock syndrome," says Charles Wibbelsman, MD, chairman of the Chiefs of Adolescent Medicine for Kaiser Permanente of Northern California and co-author of *The Teenage Body Book.* "I walk into the exam room and the smell is so overpowering that I really want to keep the door open." Of course, sweaty feet are just the beginning. As soon as puberty hits and the hormones start flowing, a preteen's hygiene requirements change dramatically in many ways. But experts say a lot of parents avoid discussing the subject. "Parents too often assume that 10- or 11-year-olds will somehow naturally learn what they need to know about hygiene," says Wibbelsman. "But that's not true. Someone has to teach them."

Kids with poor hygiene face consequences. Some are medical: they may be more prone to developing rashes and infections. But equally important, they may quickly become known at school for being dirty. That sort of bad rep can be hard to shake and damaging to self-esteem. So as a parent, it's your job to help your kids and explain the teen hygiene basics. But where do you start? How can you give your preteen daughter responsibility for her own hygiene? And how can you get your teenage son -- who, let's be honest, stinks -- to shower every day without relentless nagging? Here are your teen hygiene answers.

**Good Teen Hygiene**

When it comes to teen hygiene, what do you need to discuss with your kids? Here's a rundown.

**Showering.** "Most elementary school kids don't shower every day, and they don't need to," says Tanya Remer Altmann, MD**,**a pediatrician and author of *Mommy Calls* and *The Wonder Years.* But she says that once puberty hits, daily showering becomes essential. Recommend that they use a mild soap and concentrate on the face, hands, feet, underarms, groin and bottom. Washing under the fingernails is key, too.

**Washing hair.** Discuss the pros and cons of daily hair washing. Some teens may prefer to skip days to prevent their hair from drying out. Others may want to wash their hair daily -- especially if they have oily hair, which can both look greasy and aggravate acne.

**Using deodorant or antiperspirant.** Your kid has always had plenty of working sweat glands. But when puberty hits, the glands become more active and the chemical composition of the sweat changes, causing it to smell stronger. When you or your kid begin to notice it, using deodorant or an antiperspirant should become part of their daily teen hygiene. Keep in mind that many self-conscious teens have a skewed perception of how much they're sweating. You may want to reassure them. "I see a lot of teens who are convinced that they're sweating a lot more than all their friends, even though they're perfectly normal," says Altmann.

**Changing clothes.** Before puberty, your kid might have gotten away with wearing the same shirt -- or even the same underwear and same socks -- day after day without anyone noticing. After puberty, that won't fly. Get your teen to understand that along with showering, wearing clean clothes each day is an important part of teen hygiene. Point out that cotton clothes may absorb sweat better than other materials.

**Preventing acne.** Altmann says that at around age 10, it makes sense for your teen to start washing his or her face twice a day. "Plenty of kids don't have any acne problems at that age, but getting in the habit early is smart," Altmann says.  Make sure your teen understands not to wash too vigorously, even if her skin is oily. Trying to scrub off the oil will just leave the skin cracked and irritated.

**Shaving and hair removal.** When you notice hair on your son's upper lip or on your daughter's legs, you can offer a brief course on razor use. Whether or not he or she wants to shave yet, at least you've provided the information. Girls may also be interested in hair removal products. You can go over the options. Your daughter may also need some reassurance; stray facial hairs that loom large when she's an inch away from the mirror may not be visible to anyone else.

**Maintaining good oral health.** Teens can get pretty lax about their oral hygiene. But brushing and flossing are crucial, especially if they're drinking coffee and sugary, acidic sodas and sports drinks. It's not only about tooth decay. Bad oral hygiene leads to bad breath -- and that's something that no teen wants, Altmann tells WebMD.

**Understanding the body**. If you're talking about good teen hygiene, that also means talking about puberty. Girls need to know about breast development and menstruation. Boys need to know about erections and wet dreams. Don't tiptoe around these subjects. If they don't get the info from you, they'll get some distorted version of it from their peers. You may find that giving your kids a good book on the subject -- or pointing them to reputable health web sites -- may help the conversation.

**Combating Teen Hygiene Myths**

Talking about the importance of good teen hygiene also means discussing what's *not* important. When you're a teenager, your understanding of how the body works is bound to be riddled with misconceptions and myths. Some common teen hygiene legends include:

* Shaving makes hair grow back faster and thicker
* Girls need to douche or else they'll smell
* Greasy foods cause acne
* Getting a tan will cure acne
* Masturbation causes blindness, hairy palms, madness, and other health calamities

So when you're talking about what's important for good teen hygiene, tell your kids to be skeptical of what they hear from their friends. You may be surprised by some of the outlandish things that otherwise sensible teenagers believe.

**Getting Your Kids to Practice Good Teen Hygiene**

Altmann says that many kids are receptive to advice about good hygiene. After all, they have a vested interest.

"Teens don't want to smell," says Altmann. "They don't want to have terrible acne. So many don't mind bathing and practicing good hygiene because they don't want people making fun of them at school."

But peer pressure isn't always enough to get kids to adopt good teen hygiene, experts say. Wibbelsman says that he finds boys more prone to bad hygiene habits.

"When it comes to hygiene for guys, there can be a steep learning curve," says Wibbelsman. "Some guys just don't care." They refuse to shower -- even after exercise. As a result, they can smell pretty rank and may start developing rashes and other problems, Wibbelsman says.

So what can you do? Here are a few tips on getting your kid to adopt better teen hygiene habits.

**Make good hygiene a responsibility.** If your teen is resistant to basic teen hygiene -- like showering after practice or using deodorant -- don't just nag or plead. Explain that taking care of himself is a responsibility, and start treating it like his other household duties. Just as he is supposed to take out the trash and keep his room clean, he now has to look after his hygiene. If he doesn't, there should be clear repercussions, like revoked privileges.

**Start early.** Altmann recommends that most parents start talking about teen hygiene issues -- and giving over some responsibility for them -- by age 10.

**Don't come down too hard.** Don't start by hassling your kids about their hygiene. Try to avoid confrontations. Once it becomes a struggle, your kids might be more likely to dig in their heels.

**Make sure your information is up to date.** Before you talk to your kids about teen hygiene, make sure you know what you're talking about. Some of the advice you got when you were younger could be outdated now -- or may never have been true in the first place.

**Be a good role model.** If you want your kid to have good hygiene habits, you need to stick to them yourself. Don't shuffle around the house in pajamas all weekend. And good luck trying to get your kid to use floss if he's never seen you with it.

**Pair up.** Altmann says that if it's possible, have mothers talk to daughters about teen hygiene issues and fathers with sons. "It often helps if there's a same-sex parent in the house to discuss these issues with the teen," says Altmann. "Kids tend to look to a same-sex parent as a role model for hygiene."

**Get some professional backup.** If you're having trouble getting through to your teen about a particular hygiene issue, make the pediatrician an ally. "Parents can always ask a pediatrician to discuss or reinforce certain hygiene issues before an appointment," says Altmann. Then once you're out of the room, the pediatrician can broach the topic with your son or daughter.

**Teen Hygiene: Talking to Your Kids**

Experts say that when you're encouraging your kids to practice good teen hygiene, explain the context. Make clear that good hygiene isn't just an arbitrary set of rules that you're forcing on them.

"Teens need to know how to take care of themselves, because they really are on the verge of adulthood," says Wibbelsman. "Within a few years, they'll be dating seriously or living with roommates." Having good hygiene will really matter.

As a parent, you need to be empathetic. Remember that puberty is an incredibly confusing time. Your kid may have lot of questions about teen hygiene that he or she doesn't know how to get answered. Try to give your teen the space to ask them.

Of course, she may resist your attempts to talk about good hygiene. She may protest, and roll her eyes, and insist she doesn't want to hear it.  But press on anyway. She'll probably be grateful that you did.