

July 2004



When it comes to contraception and protection, there is a gap between what teens think they know and what they really do. While the majority says they are familiar with many of the different options available to them today, many teen girls and boys hold dangerous misperceptions about which methods are effective for disease prevention versus pregnancy, according to a national survey of adolescent boys and girls aged 15 to 17.

Teens are disproportionately impacted by unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV. With so many new methods on the market, teens are faced with more options than ever before. Unfortunately, their understanding of these methods is uneven, and many teens report they are getting their information about contraceptive options from their friends and product advertising, which may be unreliable sources.

This survey snapshot explores attitudes about and knowledge of contraceptive methods among adolescents. It is based on a national random sample telephone survey with 519 teens ages 15 to 17 conducted from April 6th through 10th, 2004 by International Communications Research (ICR) for the Kaiser Family Foundation and *seventeen* magazine. This is the ninth in a series of nationally representative surveys conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation and *seventeen* magazine.

# Birth Control and Protection

A Series of National Surveys of Teens About Sex

**sexsmarts**  
a public information partnership



**SexSmarts** is an ongoing public information partnership between the **Kaiser Family Foundation** and ***seventeen* magazine** to provide young people with information and resources on sexual health issues. The campaign addresses a range of topics from decision making about sex, including how to say no, to the real facts on HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

Under the partnership, the Foundation and *seventeen* periodically survey teens about their knowledge and attitudes about sex and sexual health. These nationally representative survey snapshots shed light on the issues facing teens today and their information needs. The campaign also includes special articles in the magazine, an online monthly column on [seventeen.com](http://seventeen.com), and other consumer education materials.

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## What's At Stake?

Teens aged 15 to 17 are concerned about their sexual health, regardless of whether they have had sexual intercourse or not. Over half of all teens are personally concerned about facing an unintended pregnancy – including more than four in ten who are “very concerned.” Slightly more say they are worried about getting a sexually transmitted disease (STD). Concern about pregnancy and disease is also high among those who haven't yet become sexually active – with more than half reporting they worry about these issues. [Figure 1]



The reality is that teens and young adults are disproportionately impacted by STDs and unintended pregnancy. According to a recent report from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill,

it is expected that by the time they reach 25, one in two sexually active young people will have contracted an STD.<sup>1</sup> And, while unintended pregnancy among teens has declined in the U.S. in recent years<sup>2</sup>, thirty-four percent of young women become pregnant at least once before they reach the age of 20 -- about 820,000 a year.<sup>3</sup> Eight in ten of these pregnancies are unintended and 79 percent are to unmarried teens.<sup>4</sup>

Though many of the teens surveyed may worry, that concern does not translate into high levels of knowledge about contraception and protection – especially when the issues are sexually transmitted diseases. However, many teens think they know all they need to know.

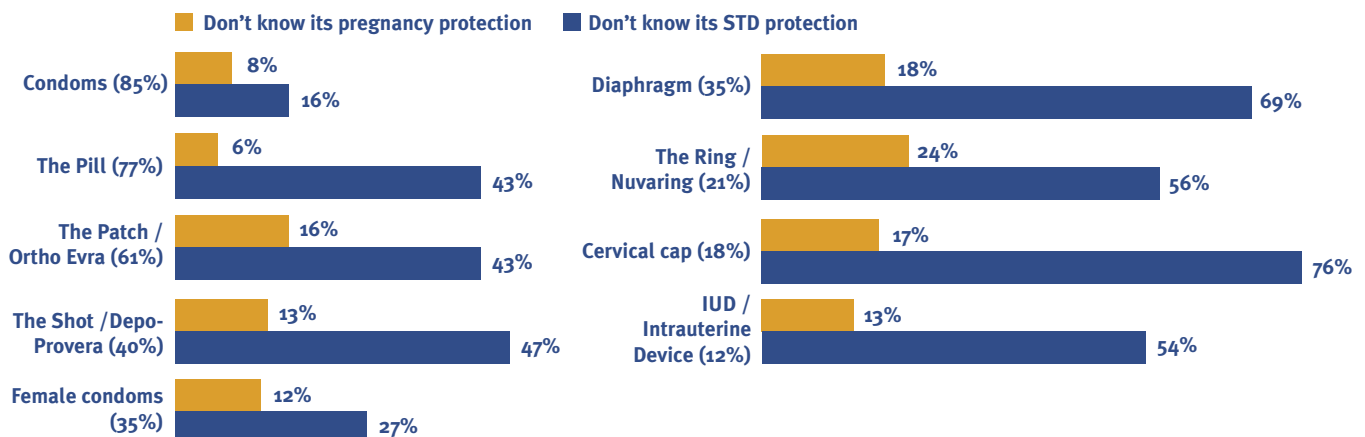
**FIGURE 1. Sexual Health Concerns**

Percent of teens 15-17 who agree that they are *personally* concerned about the following:



**FIGURE 2. Perception v Knowledge: STDs and Pregnancy Prevention**

Percent of teens 15-17 who say they are “a lot” or “somewhat familiar” with this method versus the percent of those same teens who *did not* consider the method to be effective or *did not* know each method's relative effectiveness at STD and pregnancy prevention:



### The Information Gap

The data show that teens 15 to 17 have a fairly high degree of awareness about various methods, but there are significant gaps in their actual knowledge. Nearly nine in ten teens surveyed say that they know “a lot” or “some” about the different methods of birth control and protection available. This sense is shared almost equally by boys and girls (85% versus 91%), as well as those who are sexually active and those who are not (93% versus 86%).

Many of those surveyed had heard of a variety of methods, including several that have recently entered the market place. They were most familiar with condoms and birth control pills. However, many have also heard of the patch (Ortho Evra®) and the ring (Nuvaring®). Teens were more likely to report having heard of some of these newer methods than options that have been available for a generation or two, like the IUD (Intrauterine Device) or the cervical cap. [Figure 2]

Comparing teens' sense of familiarity with their actual knowledge about what methods protects against – and what they don't – reveals that there is a dangerous information gap.

When it comes to pregnancy prevention, many teens underestimate the effectiveness of options, especially newer ones. Teens seem to trust birth control pills for pregnancy prevention, however, nearly one in five of those who had heard of new hormonal methods, the patch or the ring, thought they were either “not too” or “not at all” effective at pregnancy prevention – or just didn't know how effective they were.

Teens in this survey are even more confused about STD protection. While more than three-fourths of those surveyed had heard of birth control pills, more than one in four of those didn't know that oral contraceptives offer no protection against sexually transmitted

**FIGURE 3. Emergency Contraception**  
Percent of teens 15-17 who agree with the following statements:

	MALES 15-17	FEMALES 15-17	SEXUALLY ACTIVE	NOT SEXUALLY ACTIVE
If a girl has just had sex and thinks she might be pregnant, is there anything she can do in the next few days to prevent pregnancy?	53%	62%	69%	52%
Have you ever heard of emergency contraceptive pills, sometimes called 'morning after pills'?	58%	68%	72%	59%
<i>(Asked only among those who have heard of EC) Do you know what emergency contraception is used for?</i>				
• To end a pregnancy, cause an abortion	46%	41%	42%	44%
• To prevent a pregnancy	49%	54%	53%	51%
<i>(Asked only among those who have had sexual intercourse) If you were having sex and thought you or your partner might be pregnant, would you consider using emergency contraception to prevent an unintended pregnancy?</i>				
	72%	62%		

disease. There is also considerable confusion about newer hormonal methods, like the patch, the shot (DEPO-PROVERA®) and the ring. Those who had heard about these methods were likely to not know whether they protect against STDs, or assume they offer protection when they do not. There was also a great deal of misinformation about the older methods, like the diaphragm, the cervical cap and the IUD, with the majority of teens who had heard of those methods mistaking them for effective protection against STDs.

Teens' knowledge about condoms, however, was more complete. Teens ages 15 to 17 are most likely to understand the effective disease protection conveyed by condoms. More than eight in ten teens had heard of condoms, and more than a third had heard of the female condom. Among those who had heard of the male condom, less than ten percent considered them to be ineffective at pregnancy prevention and fewer than one in five thought the it was not effective at disease prevention. For female condoms, the confusion was slightly greater, with 1 in 10 underestimating its effectiveness at pregnancy prevention, and more than one in four underestimating its effectiveness at protecting against disease.

### Emergency Contraception

Emergency contraception pills (ECP) are a form of contraception that can be used shortly after sexual intercourse to prevent pregnancy. It is intended to be used in cases of unprotected sex or possible birth control failure, such as a condom breaking, and not as a regular form of contraception. Like other forms of contraception, emergency contraception prevents pregnancy from occurring. It cannot terminate an established pregnancy.

Currently there are two methods of ECPs available – Preven and Plan B. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recently reviewed whether one of these methods – Plan B – should be made available over the counter and without a prescription from a doctor, and decided that until it had more data on the impact of the drug on teens, it would keep the product available by prescription only.

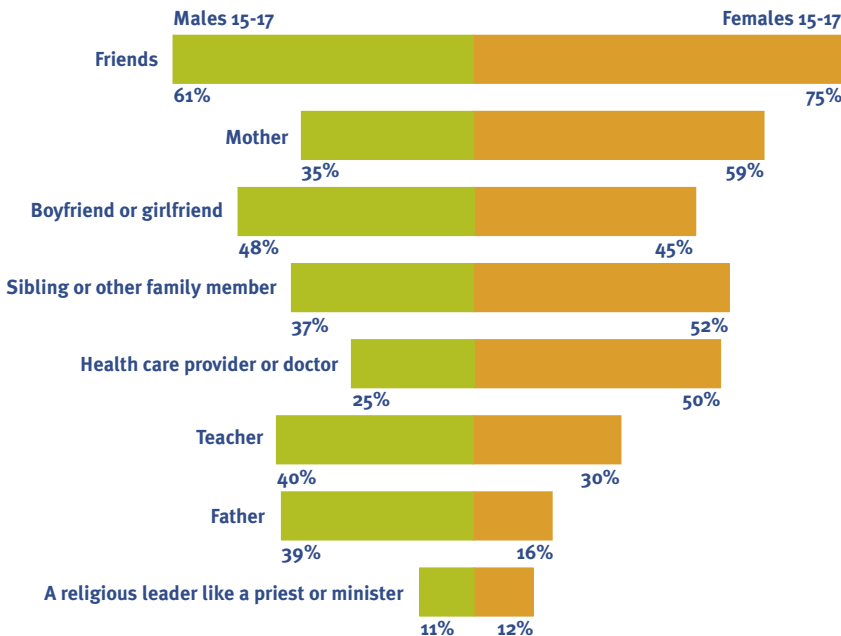
More than six in 10 teens surveyed had heard of emergency contraception, with girls more likely than boys to report being familiar. Sexually active teens were also slightly more likely than their peers who are waiting to know that there is something a woman can take after sex to prevent pregnancy, and to report having heard of emergency contraception, or the 'morning after' pill. [Figure 3]

Among those who had heard of it, there was confusion about how it works and how it is different from abortion drugs like mifepristone. More than one in four teen girls and boys incorrectly believe that emergency contraception causes an abortion. Girls were more likely than boys who have heard of emergency contraception to report correctly that it prevents pregnancy. Among sexually active teens who had heard of emergency contraception, the majority would consider using it, including more boys than girls.

### Contraceptive Decision Making

With decision-making about contraception and protection so complicated, teens rely on a range of people for conversations about the topic. Friends top the list, followed by mom, partners, and other family members. About half have spoken with a health care provider or a teacher about available options. Only one in three has talked with dad. [Figure 4]

**FIGURE 4. Talking About Contraception and Protection**  
Percent of teens 15-17 who report ever having talked with the following person about birth control and protection options:



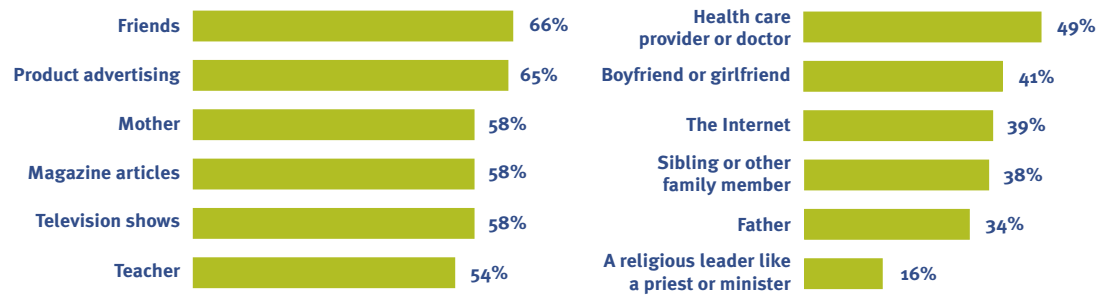
Boys and girls appear to have different confidants when it comes to contraception and protection. After friends, boys are most likely to talk with their partners and teachers. Girls turn to mom and their doctors, in addition to peers. While fathers were at the bottom of the list overall, teen boys were twice as likely than girls to report having talked with dad about contraception and protection.

Across the board, those who are sexually active were much more likely to have talked with someone about these issues, with more than eight in 10 conversing with friends and partners. They were even more likely to have talked with their parents and a health care provider.

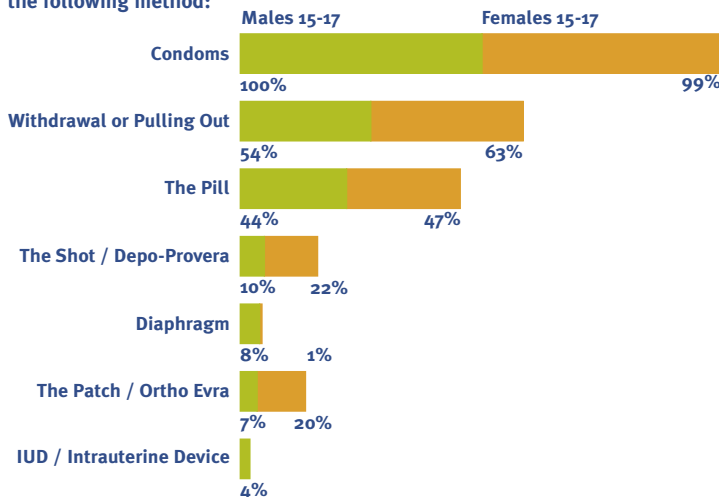
Teens say they get their information from a wide range of sources, including people in their lives as well as the media. Among all teens surveyed, more than half say they have gotten information about birth control and protection options from friends – followed closely by product advertising. Also high on the list is mom, with equal numbers saying they get information from magazines and television on the topic. [Figure 5]



**FIGURE 5. Information Sources**  
Percent of all teens 15-17 who report getting “a lot” or “some” information about birth control and protection options from the following sources:



**FIGURE 6. Contraceptive Use: Methods**  
Percent of *sexually active* teens 15-17 who report ever using (or a partner using) the following method:



### Contraceptive Use

Among the one third of this sample that reported ever having intercourse, eight in 10 use a method of contraception or protection “regularly.” Seven in 10 say they use a method every time. Fewer than one in 10 reported using a method only “some of the time” or “never.”

Sexually-active 15 to 17 year olds report that condoms are the most frequently used method of protection – with nearly all of both boys and girls reporting having used them with a partner at least once. Withdrawal or pulling out – a method that is not effective at pregnancy prevention or STD protection – was #2 on the list, with more than half of boys and nearly two-thirds of girls saying they had done it at least once. Slightly less than half of teens reported using oral contraceptives – the pill. [Figure 6]

<sup>1</sup> UNC-Chapel Hill School of Journalism and Mass Communication, *Our Voices, Our Lives, Our Futures: Youth and Sexually Transmitted Diseases*, February 2004.

<sup>2</sup> The National Campaign To Prevent Teen Pregnancy, *United States Birth Rates for Teens 15-19, 1970-2002*.

<sup>3</sup> The National Campaign To Prevent Teen Pregnancy, *Factsheet: How is the 34% statistic calculated?* 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Ventura, S.J., Hamilton, B.E., & Sutton, P.D. *Revised Birth and Fertility Rates for the United States, 2000 and 2001*. National Vital Statistics Reports 51(4), and Hamilton, B.E., Martin, J.A., & Sutton, P.D. (2003). *Births: Preliminary Data for 2002*. National Vital Statistics Reports, 51(11).