

May 2001



Most teens will hear at least something about the facts of life from their parents. And, "sex ed" is now a standard part of the curriculum for the average high school student. But, one place many teens want to go for more information about sexual health issues is the doctor's office.

A new national survey of more than 500 teens indicates that many health care providers may miss opportunities to talk with their young patients about their sexual decisions and health. Teens are less likely to have discussed topics such as their sexual history, contraceptive options, or testing for HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) during a doctor's visit than other tough issues facing adolescents today—like alcohol and drug use or smoking.

While many teens say they have a regular source of care, few say they have sought sexual health services. Among some of the barriers they say prevent young people from getting sexual health care are cost, confidentiality, and simply not knowing where to go.

This survey snapshot examines teens' attitudes and experiences related to sexual health services. It is the third in a series of nationally-representative surveys conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation and *seventeen* magazine.

Sexual Health Care and Counsel

A Series of National Surveys of Teens About Sex

sexsmarts
a public information partnership

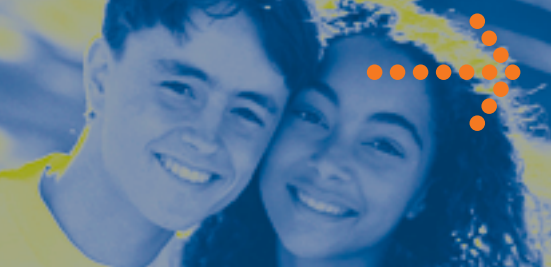


SexSmarts is an ongoing public information partnership between the **Kaiser Family Foundation** and **seventeen** magazine to provide young people with information and resources on sexual health issues. The campaign addresses a range of topics from decision making about sex, including how to say no, 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 issues teens need more information about. The campaign also includes special articles in the magazine, an online monthly column on *seventeen.com*, and other consumer education materials.

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Missed Opportunities?

When it comes to where teens get information about issues affecting their sexual health care, including decision making, contraceptive choices, STD risk and testing, teens are as likely to have gotten information from a TV show (60%) as a health care provider (62%). Just 37 percent of 12–17 year olds—and 60 percent of 15–17 year olds who are sexually active—have ever visited a doctor’s office, hospital, or any kind of community or school-based clinic for sexual health care or information.

While eight in ten teens (83%) say they have a regular source of care for their general health needs, relatively few have discussed their sexual health with health care providers. Only one in four have *ever* discussed their sexual history (including *whether* they are currently sexually active) with a doctor or other health care professional, and just 26 percent have talked about their sexual decision making. Fewer than a third have received any information from a health care provider about birth control options, instruction about how to use a condom, advice about STD testing, or counseling about sexual assault or abuse (Figure 1A). These results are supported by other recent research findings on adolescents and sexual health care.¹

Teens who have had sexual intercourse—30 percent of 15–17 year olds surveyed—were more likely to have received sexual health care than those who were not sexually active. However, even among these teens, fewer than half discussed their sexual history with a health care provider (Figure 1B). Only about one in two had a conversation about birth control options or STD testing. And, only a third of sexually active teens had talked with a provider about how to use a condom.

It is not just information teens are missing out on; many are not getting routine examinations and other tests. Only a third of 15–17 year old girls have had a gynecological exam. And, only one in ten 15–17 year olds have ever been tested for HIV or other STDs (12% each).

(See sidebar on the American Medical Association’s *Guidelines for Adolescent Preventive Services* or GAPS.)

Missed Communication

FIGURE 1A. Percent of 12–17 year olds who say they have ever discussed... with a health care provider

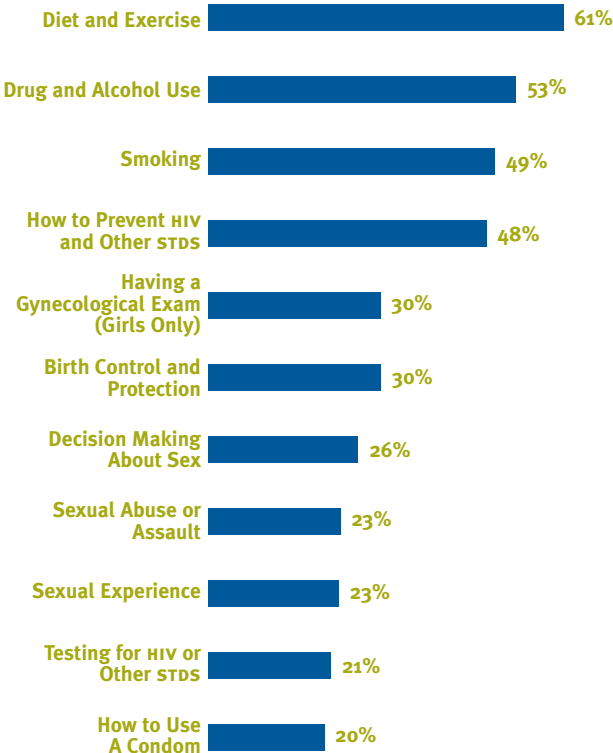
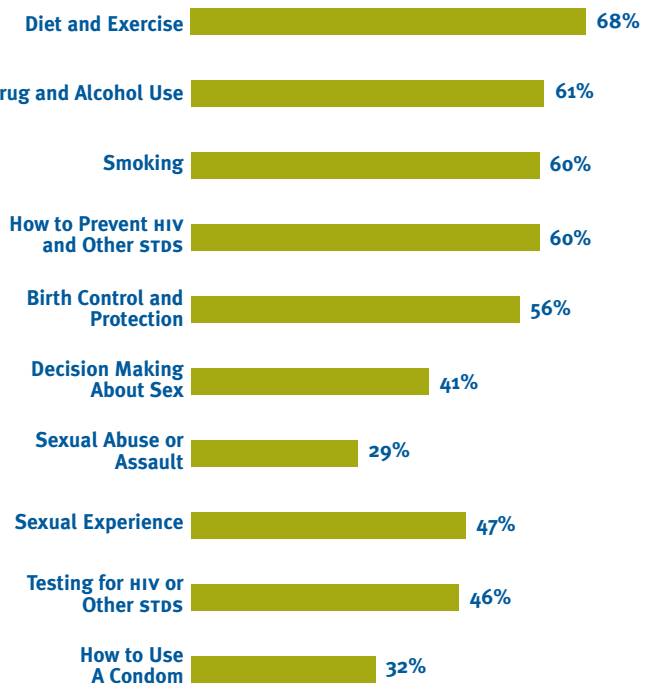
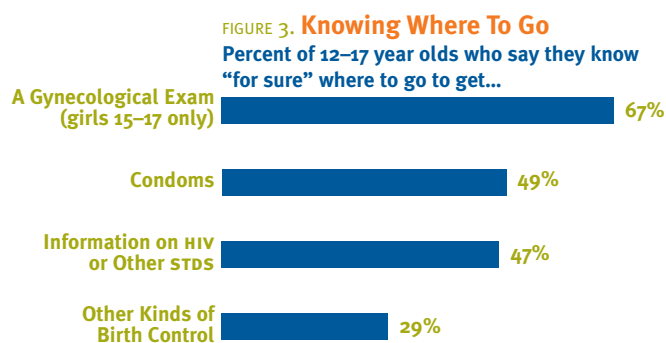
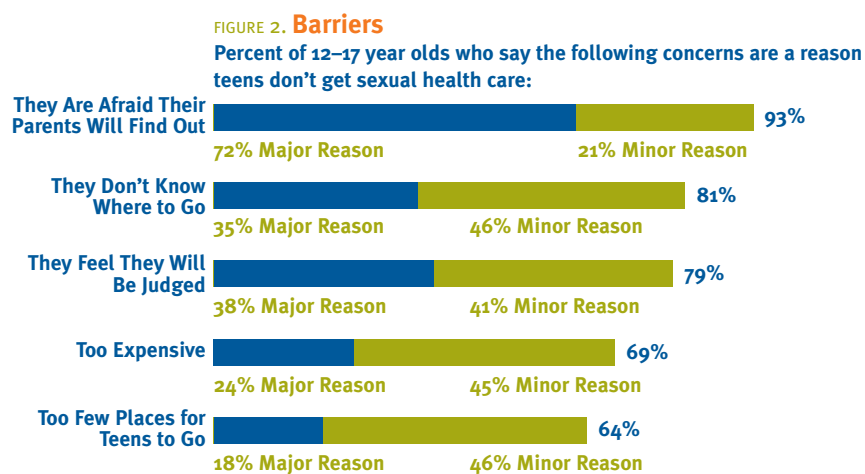


FIGURE 1B. Percent of sexually active teens (15–17) who say they have ever discussed... with a health care provider





What are teens talking about with health care providers? They are more likely to have talked about substance use and physical activity than most issues related to sex. For example, teens were nearly twice as likely to have talked about drugs and alcohol than about sexual decision making. More than 60 percent of teens said they had discussed diet and exercise with a doctor, followed by about half who said they had been counseled about alcohol and drug use, smoking, and HIV and STD prevention (Figure 1A).

Barriers to Care

When it comes to getting advice from a health professional about sexual health issues, many teens say they simply don't know where to go: 81 percent say this is a reason young people don't get care (Figure 2). Close to half—45 percent—admit they either do not know of places in their own community where teens can go to get sexual health care (21%) or they don't think these services are available (24%). Just under half say they would know “for sure” where to go to get condoms if they needed them, and less than one in three teens would know where to get other kinds of birth control like “the Pill” (Figure 3).

American Medical Association's Guidelines for Adolescent Preventive Services (GAPS)

The American Medical Association's Guidelines for Adolescent Preventive Services (GAPS) recommend that teens receive the following sexual health services during early ages (11–14) and middle ages (15–17) adolescence:

All adolescents should receive health guidance annually regarding responsible sexual behaviors, including abstinence. Latex condoms to prevent STDs including HIV infection, and appropriate methods of birth control should be made available, as should instructions on how to use them effectively. Specifically:

- Counseling that abstinence from sexual intercourse is the most effective way to prevent pregnancy and STDs;
- Counseling on how HIV infection is transmitted, the dangers of the disease, and the fact that latex condoms are effective in preventing STDs;
- Reinforcement of responsible sexual behavior for adolescents who are not currently sexually active and for those who are using birth control and condoms appropriately;
- Counseling on the need to protect themselves and their partners from pregnancy; STDs; and sexual exploitation.

All adolescents should be asked annually about involvement in sexual behaviors that may result in unintended pregnancy and STDs, including HIV infection.

Sexually active adolescents (both boys and girls) should be screened for STDs, including:

- Gonorrhea;
- Chlamydia;
- Syphilis;
- Human papilloma virus (HPV).

Female adolescents who are sexually active (or any female 18 or older) should be screened annually for cervical cancer by use of a Pap test.

Providers are also encouraged to establish office policies regarding confidential care for adolescents and how parents will be involved in that care. These policies should be made clear to adolescents and their parents.

¹ Porter LE and Ku L, “Use of Reproductive Health Services Among Young Men,” 1995, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 2000, 27(3):186-194; Burstein G, “Most teens not provided STD or pregnancy prevention counseling during check-ups,” December 6, 2000 CDC Press Release, based on data from the 1999 Youth Risk Behavior Survey.



Concerns about confidentiality may prevent some teens from getting care they need. More than nine out of ten say teens don't get sexual health care because they are "afraid [their] parents will find out." Almost seven in ten say teens are concerned they won't be able to afford the care (Figure 2). Others worry about how they will be treated by health care professionals if they seek advice or care about sexual issues: 79 percent say teens feel they will be "judged or looked down on."

Trusted Sources

Many teens say they would like to hear more from their health care providers about sexual health issues (Figure 4). In fact, considering all of teens' sources on topics about sex and relationships, the health care community is at the top of the list of where teens want to turn for more information. If they were in need of sexual health care, half of teens say they would most likely visit a private doctor's office (55%), followed by either a clinic that specializes in teens or a hospital (45% each).

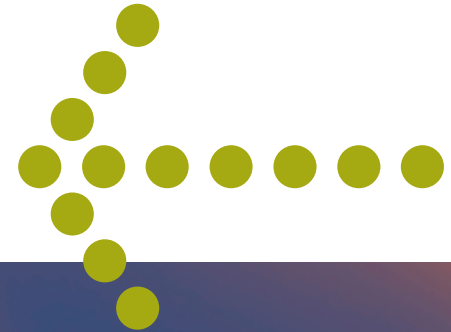


FIGURE 4. **Trusted Sources**
Percent of 12–17 year olds who say they...

