

August 2001



Teens today are as concerned about HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) as they are about pregnancy, with about half saying these are big issues facing people their age. Still almost one third of sexually active teens say they aren't personally worried about getting an STD.

STDs are more prevalent among teens than among adults, with about one fourth of all new cases occurring among 15-19 year olds.<sup>1</sup> And these statistics are hitting close to home. One out of five teens know someone with an STD. Even so, many underestimate their own risk for becoming infected with an STD (including HIV/AIDS), thinking it can't happen to them.

While teens may *think* they know all they need to about STDs, many *don't*. Teens don't have the facts about risk, symptoms or long-term health effects. Many want to know more about STDs, especially how to know whether you have one, how to protect yourself, the specifics on testing, and the treatments available.

This survey snapshot of over 500 teens examines their knowledge and attitudes about STDs. It is the fourth in a series of nationally-representative surveys conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation and *seventeen* magazine.



<sup>1</sup> Donovan, P., *Testing Positive: Sexually Transmitted Disease and the Public Health Response*. 1993, New York, NY. The Alan Guttmacher Institute.

# Sexually Transmitted Disease

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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## Myths and Facts

Nearly three quarters of teens say they know “a lot” or “some” information about STDs. More than 80 percent know that STDs can have serious health effects, but few know the specifics. Many either don’t know or don’t think that infertility (37%) and cancer (73%) can be health consequences of STDs.

Most people with an STD don’t know they have one because they don’t experience symptoms, and because so few people are screened.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, almost a third of teens think that they would “know” if they had an STD – even if they weren’t tested. And many feel the same way about their partners—a third said they would know if someone they were dating had an STD (Figure 2). One out of five agrees that you don’t need to worry about STDs unless you have sex with “a lot of partners,” and one out of four either doesn’t know or doesn’t believe you are at risk when you have oral sex (26%). Almost 1 in 5 doesn’t know or doesn’t believe that most people who have an STD don’t know it themselves (28%).

Even among those who have had sex, many don’t have the facts. More than one in ten thinks they are only vulnerable to STDs if they have had several partners (13%), one in five believes that they would know if they had an STD – even if they had never been tested (22%). Nearly the same number doesn’t know that a person can spread an STD even if they aren’t experiencing any symptoms (18%).

## Perceptions of Risk

Half of teens aged 12–17 say that STDs (including HIV/AIDS) are a big problem facing their generation today. Among sexually active 15–17 year olds, more than two thirds are *personally* worried about becoming infected with HIV/AIDS, and other STDs, like herpes or gonorrhea (Figure 1). Twenty percent of all teens surveyed know someone who has had an STD, and one in ten knows someone who is HIV positive. Among those teens who are sexually active, the numbers are even higher, with half saying they know someone with an STD.

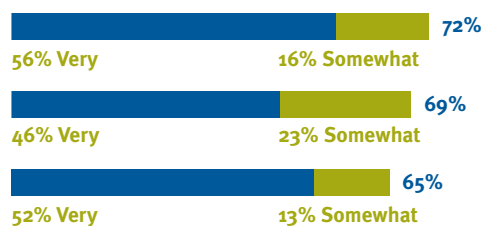
Even though they may know people with STDs, very few seem to realize just how common they are. Three quarters of teens underestimate the number of teens with STDs. According to the American Social Health Association, one in four sexually active teens will get an STD this year.<sup>2</sup> Among teens who have had sex, half (50%) realize their risk.

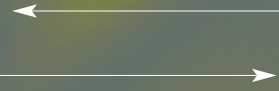
FIGURE 1. Teen Concerns About Sexual Health

Percent of 12–17 year olds who say the following are big problems facing people their age:

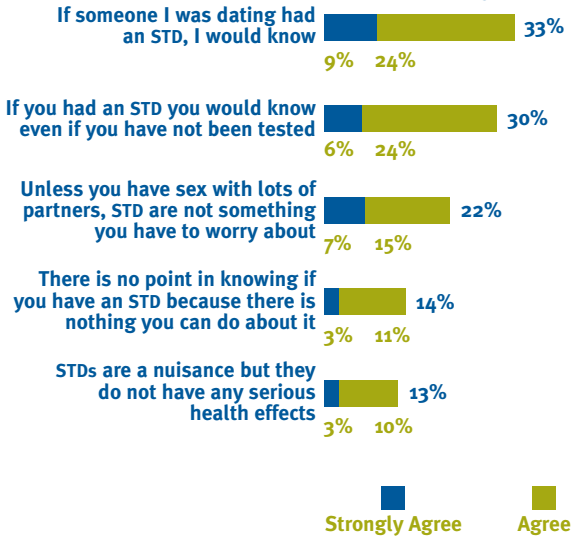


Percent of sexually active 15–17 year olds who say they are *personally* concerned about getting an STD, HIV/AIDS or becoming pregnant:





**FIGURE 2. STD Myths**  
Percent of 12–17 year olds who agree with the following statements:

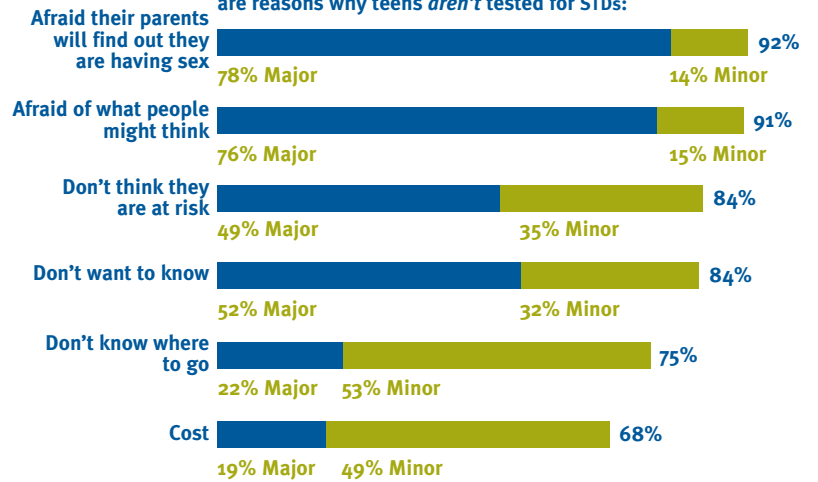


### STD Testing: Don't Ask, Don't Tell

Teens think testing is a good thing in the abstract—only 14 percent agreed that testing is useless “because there is nothing you can do about” STDs. However, only a third of sexually active teens have ever been tested (35%).<sup>4</sup> Why so few? One reason is fear. According to teens, many are worried about lack of confidentiality—having parents find out they are sexually active, or friends learn they are being tested (Figure 3). More than eight in ten say teens aren't tested because they just don't want to know the results.

Many teens suggest that their peers aren't getting tested because they don't think STDs can happen to them. More than 80 percent said that people their age aren't screened for STDs because they don't think they are at risk (Figure 3). This opinion was shared by even more sexually active teens—93 percent say that teens aren't tested because they don't think it could happen to them. And, even if they felt they *should*, most said that teens won't end up being screened because they don't know where to go, or how to pay for it.

**FIGURE 3. STD Testing Barriers**  
Percent of 12–17 year olds who say the following are reasons why teens aren't tested for STDs:



<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> American Social Health Association.

<sup>4</sup> *Sexual Health Care and Counsel*. May, 2001. *Seventeen* magazine and Kaiser Family Foundation.





## Taboo Topics

Teens agree (65%) that STDs just aren't something that people discuss. Nonetheless, a third of teens say they have learned "a lot" or "some" information about STDs from friends or siblings (Figure 4). More teens have talked about STDs at home; 40 percent say they *have* heard about the issue from their parents. Slightly more learned about the topic from their doctors. About a third say they have personally found information on STDs on television and in magazines —while fewer look online. The large majority, however, says they have learned about STDs in school during sex education. This is especially true of sexually active teens, of whom nearly nine in ten have learned about disease in class.

Even with these resources, more than half of teens want to know *more* about the details: how to know whether you have an STD, how to protect yourself, the treatments available, and exactly what happens during an STD test (Figure 5). More than 40 percent want to know the details about testing: where to go, whether it's confidential and how much it costs. About the same number want help with communication, talking about STDs with their parents and their partners.

FIGURE 4. **The STD Story – Where Teens Get Their Information**

Percent of 12–17 year olds who say they have learned about STDs from the following sources:

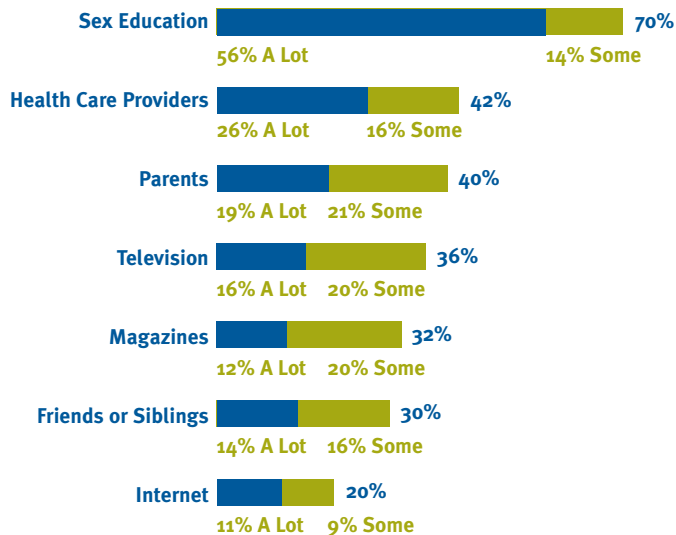


FIGURE 5. **More of The Story**

Percent of 12–17 year olds who say they want to know *more* about the following...

