

October 2003



Virginity and The First Time

A Series of National Surveys of Teens About Sex

When it comes to sex, for many teens the perception can be very different from the reality. By almost equal measures, teens *overestimate* and *underestimate* the percentage of their peers who are sexually active. Some of these differing views may be related to how they define “sex” today, specifically whether they consider oral sex to be sex or not. Teens are split when it comes to this issue.

Whatever they think about who is having sex, the large majority of teens surveyed see value in waiting. Virtually all – including as many of those who are sexually active as those who are not – say being a virgin in high school is a “good thing” and that teens who choose not to have sex are “supported” in that decision. Teens also acknowledge that delaying sex has a variety of benefits including: respect, control, and freedom from worry about sexual health risks like pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

The third of teens in this survey who *have had sex* also cite a variety of factors as affecting their decision, including feeling that the time was right, being in love, or having found the right person. However, less positive factors, such as peer pressure and drugs and alcohol, also played a role for some teens.

This survey snapshot explores perceptions of virginity and first sexual activity among adolescents. It is based on a national random sample telephone survey with 508 teens ages 15 to 17 conducted from June 4 to 9, 2003 by International Communications Research (ICR) for the Kaiser Family Foundation and *seventeen* magazine.

This is the eighth in a series of nationally representative surveys conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation and *seventeen* magazine.

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, content on seventeen.com, and other consumer education materials.

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Everybody's Doing It...Right?

Wrong. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention about half of teens in high school have had sexual intercourse. Or looked at another way, half *have not*.¹ While many teens have a generally accurate picture of teen sexuality today, some are off the mark. About a third of teens (34%) in this survey *overestimate* how many of their peers are sexually active, while another quarter (24%) *underestimate* this rate. And, few (3%) realize their generation is actually *less likely* to be sexually active than that from a decade ago.²

Contributing to these varied perceptions about sex may be that young people often have differing views about what constitutes sex. When it comes to defining virginity, teens are evenly divided on whether or not oral sex is “sex.” Half say no (50%), half say yes (48%).

Virginity and Waiting

Teens overwhelmingly value virginity and waiting, regardless of their personal decision. More than nine in 10 agree that being a virgin is a “good thing” (Figure 1). A majority also say teens who choose to wait are “supported” in their decision. Still, many acknowledge that waiting to have sex can be a “difficult decision” nonetheless. While most agree that gender doesn’t make a difference, a little over a quarter say it is easier for girls than boys to stick to a decision not to be sexually active in high school.

Most teens agree that it is important to be a virgin in high school, but what about after graduation? Among teens *who have not had sex*, fewer than 10 percent say they are waiting to have sex until they are out of school (Figure 2). More than four in 10 are waiting for a committed relationship, and more than a third are waiting for marriage.

FIGURE 1. Attitudes About Virginity

Percent of all teens 15-17 who agree with the following statements:

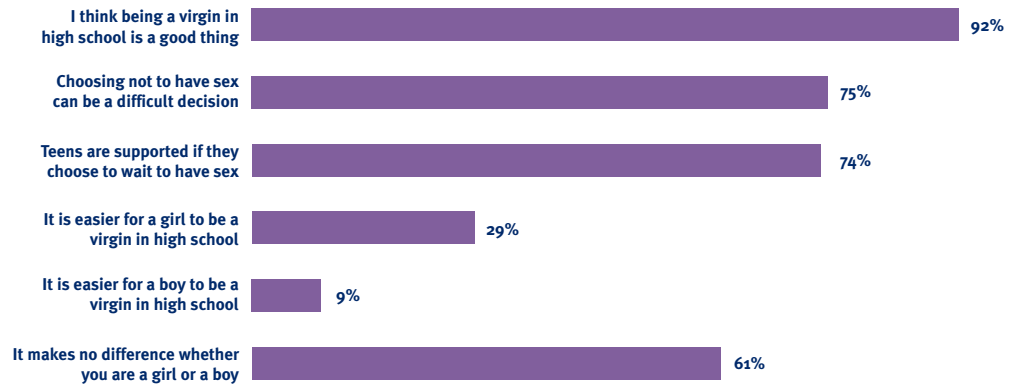
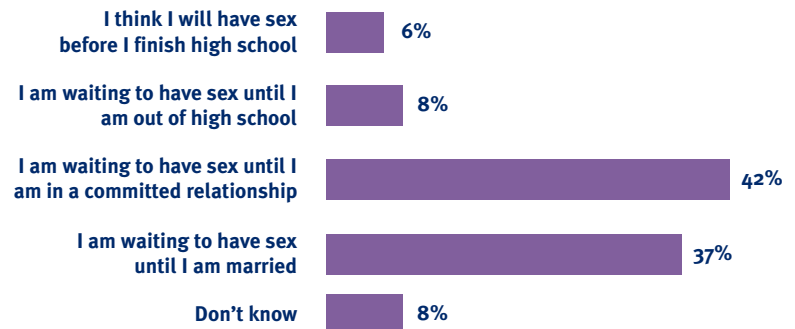


FIGURE 2. Waiting, But How Long?

Percent of teens 15-17 who have not had sex who said the following best matches their personal decision about sex:



Why Wait?

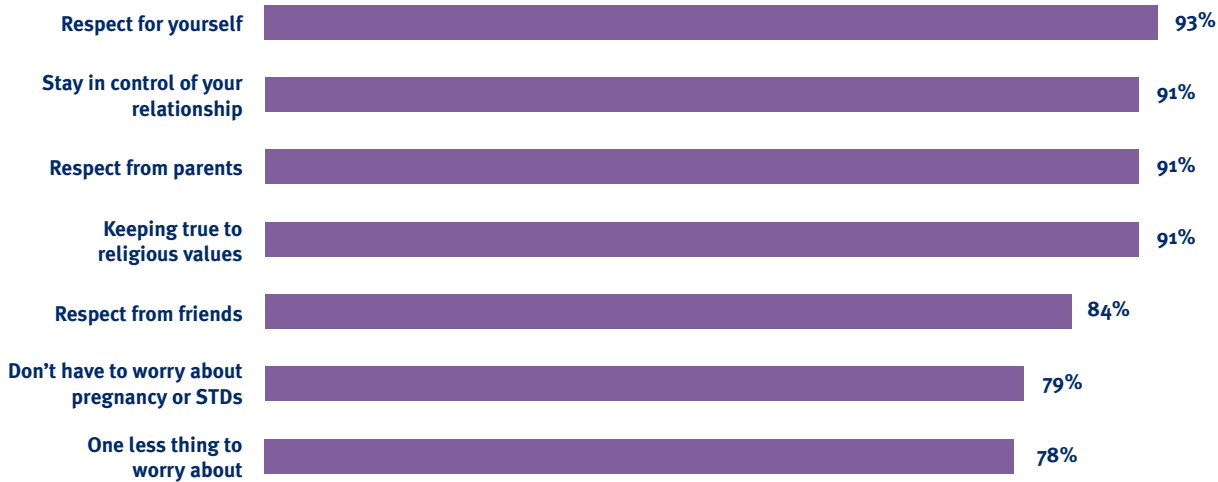
So what are they waiting for? Generally, teens agree that monogamy and maturity are central to their decision-making. When asked what age is it appropriate to lose your virginity, teens most frequently said 18 or when you are married. Among teens surveyed *who had not had sex*, over three-fourths agreed that they were waiting to have sex when they are in a committed relationship or married (Figure 2).

¹ CDC, Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance data 2001.

² CDC, Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance data 1991-2001.

FIGURE 3. Why Wait?

Percent of all teens 15-17 who agree with the following statements about the benefits of waiting to have sex:



Teens agree that delaying sex has a variety of personal benefits, ranging from respect to personal control. More than nine in 10 note that abstaining from sexual activity in high school results in having respect for yourself and enjoying the respect of your family (Figure 3). Waiting also leads teens to feel like they are in control of their relationships, and are behaving consistently with their moral or religious beliefs. Lower on the list, but still significant, is respect from friends. General worry or concern about sexual health risks were also considerable.

to volunteer that marriage was when they *personally* felt it was best to lose your virginity. Among those who have already had sexual intercourse, almost half believe it is best to wait – until 18 or older (29%), or for marriage (17%) – in spite of their own decision.

Teens are divided in their views about what happens the “first time.” While 41 percent believe in most instances it is “planned,” more than half (57%) say often sex is just something that “hap-

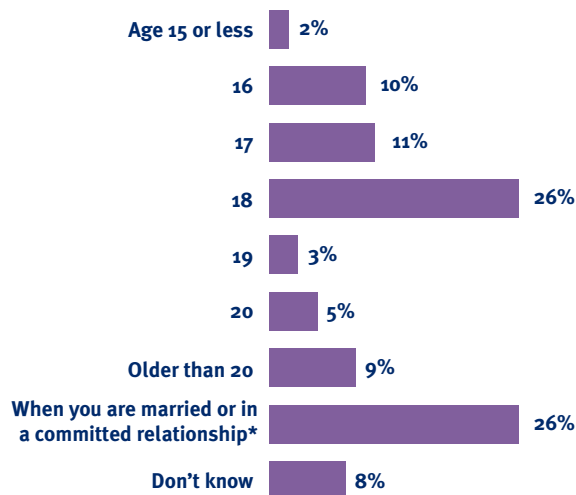
pens.” There is no significant difference in the views of teens who have already had sex as opposed to those who have not. Part of the reason so many teens may perceive the “first time” experience as unplanned may be the involvement of drugs or alcohol. Eight in 10 have the impression that alcohol or drugs are a part of many teens’ first sexual experience, and nearly one in five *sexually active teens* surveyed said that they were using drugs or alcohol when they lost their virginity.

The First Time

Most adolescents surveyed agree that sexual activity is most appropriate among people aged 18 and older, or those who are married or in committed relationships (Figure 4). Over a third agree that one should be at least 18 years old when you lose your virginity – and about a quarter believe you should wait for marriage. Very few – 2 percent of teens surveyed – consider sex under the age of 15 to be appropriate. Girls were more likely than boys surveyed

FIGURE 4. The Right Time

Percent of all teens 15-17 who personally agree that the following is the age when it is OK to lose (your) virginity:



*(volunteered)

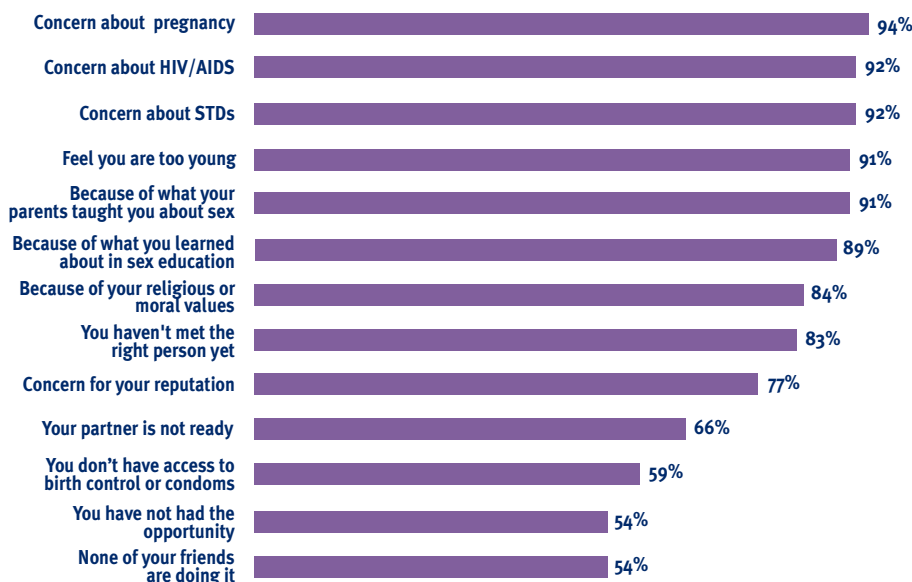
Over a third (38%) of both sexually active teens and those who are not sexually active agree that when you lose your virginity you “just want to get it over with.” These feelings of anxiety may contribute to many teens’ belief that they don’t have to worry about their sexual health or contraception the first time. Almost one fifth (17%) of teens surveyed agreed that you don’t have to use birth control or condoms the first time you have sex, and over half (54%) say that you aren’t even thinking about STDs, including HIV/AIDS. This is surprising considering that teens report that pregnancy, HIV/AIDS and other STDs are top concerns during their first sexual experience.

Decision-Making

Among the two thirds of teens in this survey who reported that they had *not* yet had sexual intercourse, many report being worried about pregnancy, HIV/AIDS and other STDs (Figure 5). What they have been taught at home and at school also influenced many of these young people’s decision to wait, as well as their own personal values. About half cited a general lack of opportunity as a factor.

FIGURE 5. Decision-Making: Saying No

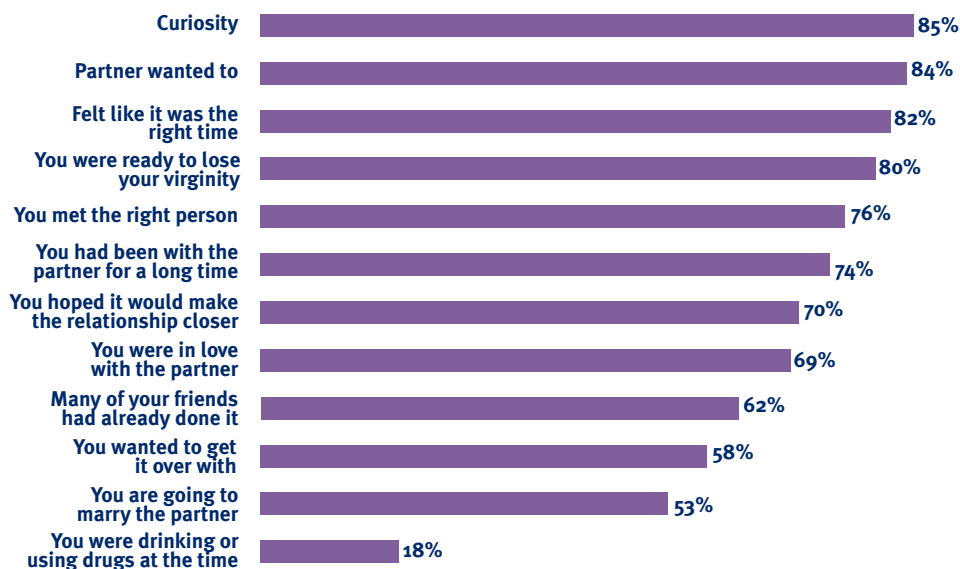
Percent of teens 15-17 who have not had sex who personally agree that the following has influenced their decision not to have sex:



Most sexually active teens indicated that their decision to have sex had to do with a sense of maturity and intimacy with a partner. Most felt “ready,” like the time was “right” for them to lose their virginity, and they were with the “right person” (Figure 6). Three fourths agreed that they had been with their partner “for a long time,” and seven in 10 were “in love.” Over half thought they would marry their first sexual partner. About two-thirds (65%) were in what they defined as a “serious relationship” when they first had sex, and most (83%) reported using condoms the first time.

FIGURE 6. Decision-Making: Saying Yes

Percent of teens 15-17 who have had sex who personally agree that the following has influenced their decision to have sex:



Nonetheless, peer pressure and substance use was also part of the mix. Over sixty percent said their friends’ sexual activity had influenced them, and nearly one in five were using drugs or drinking at the time. Nearly six in 10 “wanted to get it over with.” And, substantial numbers had mixed feelings about their decision. Half of teens who were sexually active (49%) wish they had waited until they were older to have sex. About one in four would change their first partner (25%) if they could, and a similar number (28%) regrets the decision to have sex altogether.