

What to Know About



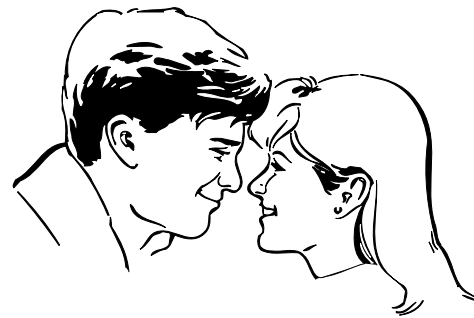
Teen Sexuality

A PUBLICATION FOR PROFESSIONALS WHO WORK
WITH ADOLESCENTS AND THE PARENTS OF ADOLESCENTS

National Trends

Research shows that the majority of American teens report they are sexually experienced by the time they graduate from high school. Since the late 1980s, national pregnancy rates have continued to grow steadily among teens aged 15-19. It is estimated that one in 12 teens will become pregnant each year, with half of these pregnancies resulting in live births. Each year more than 300,000 babies are born.

Unprotected sexual activity puts adolescents at increased risk of contracting AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases. In today's era of AIDS, one careless sexual encounter can result in death. Research shows that only half of sexually active teens use contraception the first time they have sexual intercourse, and younger teens are less likely than their older peers to use contraceptives. Given this, many teens are at risk of becoming pregnant or contracting a sexually transmitted disease (including HIV or AIDS). HIV is the 10th leading cause of death among adolescents.



Only half of sexually active teens use contraception the first time they have sexual intercourse.

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About Tennessee Teens

Unfortunately, Tennessee teens are becoming infected with the HIV virus at a faster rate than any other state in the nation. According to state Department of Health records, 25 percent (886 cases) of all reports of persons with AIDS in Tennessee were 20-29 at the time of their diagnosis. The incubation period for HIV to develop into AIDS is 7-10 years; therefore, it is likely that these young adults contracted the HIV virus in their adolescent years. Between October 1992 and October 1993, 28 Tennessee teens aged 13-19 were diagnosed with AIDS.

According to the 1995 Youth Risk Behavior survey of Tennessee Youth, 90 percent of 9th - 12th grade students report being taught about AIDS and HIV infections in school. Despite this, a large proportion of teens continue to place themselves at high risk of contracting AIDS or HIV. Sixty-one percent of students in the unweighted Youth Risk Behavior sample reported they had had sexual intercourse. Twenty-four percent had had more than four sexual partners in their lifetime. Of teens who had sexual intercourse within three months of the study, 47 percent did **not** use a condom at the time of last sexual intercourse.

Since 1992, the adolescent pregnancy rate in Tennessee has dropped. Nonetheless, far too many teens continue to become pregnant. In 1994, 6,255 teen pregnancies occurred. That is an average of 17 girls, ages 10 - 17, who became pregnant each day in 1994. From these pregnancies, 4,809 babies were born. More than half (57 percent) of teen births were to white females, at least 9 percent of babies born to a teen mother had a teen father under the age of 18 and 13 percent of these babies were low birthweight.

Becoming a teen parent seriously limits a teen's life options. One in three teenage mothers drop out of high school, making it more difficult to get a job that will keep her and her child out of poverty.



Why Are Teens Sexually Active?

Given the risks of getting pregnant or contracting a sexually transmitted disease or AIDS, one might wonder why adolescents continue to take sexual risks. During adolescence, teenagers experience dramatic hormonal and bodily changes that influence their behavior. They begin to experience sexual urges that are new to them, and begin to assert their independence from parents. This is also a time when teens begin to balance parental values with their own emerging beliefs about themselves and the world. Friendships also become increasingly important during this time. These new experiences, feelings and relationships all contribute to adolescent sexual behavior. Research suggests a number of factors associated with teen sexual behavior.

We Know From Research That...



- Teens who do poorly and are uncommitted to school are at greater risk of becoming pregnant than their peers who enjoy and are actively involved in school.
- Teens are more likely to be sexually active if they *believe* their peers are having sex (beliefs may differ from what is really going on).
- Teens who feel close to and communicate with their parents about sexual matters (e.g. relationships and contraception) are more likely to postpone sexual intercourse.
- The earlier teens begin dating, the greater the likelihood that they will have sexual intercourse at an early age.
- Teens whose parents supervise them closely are more likely to postpone sexual intercourse.
- Teens who attend church regularly and who are committed to a religion (regardless of denomination) are less likely to be sexually active.
- Teens who have high educational or career goals are less likely to be sexually active.

What Can Parents Do?

Talk with your child about matters concerning sexuality such as dating, their feelings about premarital sex, conception, loving relationships and contraception.

Share your values about premarital sex and teen parenting. Discussing someone else's situation (e.g., as seen on TV or in real life) can be a useful way to communicate your values.

Don't be afraid to say you don't have all the answers. Find out what you need to know from books or your family doctor.

Answer your teens' questions without being judgmental or jumping to conclusions about their behavior. Be available to talk with your teens and *listen* to what they say.

Books for parents:

Cassell, Carol. *Straight from the Heart*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988.

Gordon, Sol & Gordon, Judith. *Raising a Child Conservatively in a Sexually Permissive World*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983.

Howard, Marion. *How To Help Your Teenager Postpone Sexual Involvement*. New York: Continuum, 1988.

Book for Teens:

Johnson, Eric. *Love and Sex in Plain Language*. New York: Harper & Row, 1985. Basic information on sexuality with emphasis on respectful relationships.

Local Resources:

Local physician or nurse practitioner
 School guidance counselor or nurse
 County Extension home economist, Agricultural Extension Service
 County health department

State Resource:

Adolescent Pregnancy Initiative
 Tennessee Department of Health
 Community Health Services Section
 6th Floor, Cordell Hull Building
 426 5th Avenue North
 Nashville, TN 37247-5210
 615-741-7366



References

1994 Adolescent Pregnancy Fact Sheet. Tennessee Department of Health.

Moore, K.A., (1994). *Facts at a Glance*. Child Trends, Inc., Washington DC.

Alan Guttmacher Institute. (1994). *Sex and America's Teenagers*. New York: Alan Guttmacher Institute.

Tennessee Kids Count: The Teen Report, 1995. The Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth. Nashville, TN.

1995 Youth Risk Behavior Survey unpublished data. Tennessee Department of Health.

Trussell, J. (1988). Teenage Pregnancy in the United States. *Family Planning Perspectives*, 20 (6).

Dryfoos, J.G. (1990). Community schools: New institutional arrangements for preventing high risk behavior. *Family Life Educator*, Summer, 4-9.

Brooks-Gunn, J. & Furstenberg, FF. (1989). Adolescent sexual behavior. *American Psychologist*, 44(2), 249-257.

Small, S.A. & Luster, T. (1994). Adolescent sexual activity; an ecological, risk-factor approach. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 56, 1-14.



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