



Sexual Activity: A Personal Decision

Many people struggle with when the best time to start having sex is, whether for the very first time, or for the first time with a new partner. Most people become sexually active at some point in their lives. In fact, 99% of Americans are sexually active by age 44. But while it may seem like all college students are having sex, the reality is that 34% of students report not having had a sexual partner in the last 12 months. Deciding when and with whom to express yourself sexually can be confusing and stressful. Deciding to postpone sex can leave you feeling like no one understands what you are going through, or values your commitment to this decision. Considering some of the issues below may help you in your decision making process.

- Remember that sexuality, sexual drive and sexual behavior are normal, healthy parts of being human. Learning as much as you can about human sexuality and your own sexual values and beliefs can help you decide how to express yourself sexually, whether that means holding hands or having intercourse.
- Learning about sexual health including: anatomy and physiology; oral, vaginal and anal sex; birth control; STI prevention; and condom use, does not increase the likelihood that a person will initiate sex earlier than they would have without having all the facts. Research has proven this over and over again. Research also shows that when people have sexual health information, they make better decisions about pregnancy and STI prevention strategies.
- Know what your sexual values are. What have your parents, religion, culture, society and media taught you about sexual health and sexual activity? Remember these are their values, and may not be yours. What do you believe? Which values would you like to live by currently in your life?
- If you have different beliefs about sexual activity than those who are important to you or who influence your life, you may be experiencing values conflict. Part of negotiating this conflict is to decide what your values really are. If you decide to live by a set of values different than your parents, this may cause you some internal conflict. You may struggle with the decisions you want to make versus the decisions others want you to make.
- When deciding to have sex for the first time, think about how you would feel about this decision. Would you feel good about yourself? Would it enhance your sense of self and self esteem? Is it a decision that *you* feel good about? This is not to say that an emotional reaction to first intercourse is a sign of trouble. On the contrary, it can be an important moment and an outpouring of feelings can be expected - feelings of joy and sadness, pleasure and disappointment.
- Have you said no to intercourse out of fear or because you don't feel it's a good decision for you? Many people have fears about sex, especially their first intercourse. Do you think there is a reason you would have an unusually difficult time? Are you afraid you would be unable to respond sexually? Are you afraid your parents would find out? A moral decision made out of fear or lack of information is not really related to morals. You must understand your own feelings and try to find someone (perhaps a counselor or health care provider) who can listen to your concerns and help answer your questions.
- Are you yielding to group pressure from your friends, family, religion, or community against what you feel is right for you? Most people don't recognize the full extent of the influence exerted on them by others. It is easy to feel you are abnormal when your views are different from most people around you. Remember that some friends may be giving the impression they are more sexually experienced than they actually are. And other people may be pressuring you to maintain "virginity" for their own reasons.
- What are you expecting from intercourse? If you believe that intercourse will transport you to the stars, turn you into a "real" woman or man overnight, magically enhance your relationship, it won't. Try to have realistic expectations before you decide. While physical intimacy *can* deepen the level of overall intimacy in the relationship, there are other aspects of connecting with your partner as well. The key is to have balance between physical, emotional, mental, spiritual and social intimacy.
- What does intercourse mean to you right now - permanent commitment? Fidelity for both partners? Love? One night stand? Explore these questions for yourself and communicate them with your partner to be sure you have the same expectations.
- However you answer these questions, does your current relationship meet these criteria? Does your partner understand what it means to you and do you understand his/her feelings? If intercourse means commitment to you and not to the other, that's trouble.

- Would you feel comfortable being naked with your partner, touching his/her genitals and having him/her touch yours, allowing yourself to respond sexually? If not, slow down and go through the stages of physical intimacy at a pace that feels right to you before having intercourse.
- Remember, there are a lot of behaviors that are sexually intimate and pleasurable between the extremes of no sexual activity and sexual intercourse. Brainstorm a list with your partner of all possible sexual behaviors and decide which ones you are comfortable with. Also keep in mind that you can try something once, and then decide it is not right for you at this time.
- Is your current relationship emotionally intimate and open? Could you tell each other if you were scared or if something hurt? Could your partner tell you he/she has never had intercourse before and was really nervous? You are much more likely to have a satisfying experience if the relationship is at this level before you have intercourse.
- Can you talk about contraception and condoms? Can you plan which methods are right for you, as a couple, and follow through on that plan?
- Are you prepared to face a pregnancy, should your contraception fail? Have you discussed prior sexual behaviors with your partner and explored STI risk, testing and prevention strategies? Remember everyone has a slightly different definition of abstinence. Some may abstain from all sexual activity, while others may be “abstinent” by only avoiding vaginal intercourse.
- Do you feel you have a comfortable space to explore sexual behaviors? Do you have the opportunity for uninterrupted privacy, free from the fear of being heard or intruded upon?
- Do you feel that all aspects of the relationship have been given time to develop at the same pace? Are you emotionally congruent with where your relationship is spiritually, intellectually and physically?
- How you express yourself sexually is your decision. If you are feeling pressured by a partner, friends, family, etc., you may want to re-evaluate from whom you receive support regarding this issue.

If after asking yourself these questions, you still feel confusion and doubt, try to find a trusted person with whom you can talk it out - a religious counselor whose ideas you respect, an older sister or brother, older woman or man you are close to, or a health care provider who can take the time to talk to you. McKinley Health Center's Health Education Unit has a Sexual Health Educator to discuss concerns with you! You can schedule an appointment by calling 333-2714.

References

American College Health Association (ACHA), National College Health Assessment Executive Summary, 2008.

Guttmacher Institute web site: <http://www.guttmacher.org>

If you are a registered University of Illinois student and you have questions or concerns, or need to make an appointment, please call: **Dial-A-Nurse at 333-2700**

If you are concerned about any difference in your treatment plan and the information in this handout, you are advised to contact your health care provider.

Visit the McKinley Health Center Web site at: <http://www.mckinley.illinois.edu>