



A safe, private place to get doctor-approved information on health, emotions, and life.

Abstinence

What Is It?

Abstinence is not having sex. A person who decides to practice abstinence has decided not to have sex or any type of intimate sexual contact.

How Does It Work?

If two people don't have sex, then sperm can't fertilize an egg and there's no possibility of a pregnancy. Some forms of birth control depend on barriers that prevent the sperm from reaching the egg (such as condoms or diaphragms). Others interfere with the menstrual cycle (as birth control pills do). With abstinence, no barriers or pills are necessary because the person is not being sexually intimate with others.

You don't have to be a virgin to practice abstinence. Sometimes people who have been having sex decide not to continue having sex. Even someone who has been having sex can still choose abstinence to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) in the future.

How Well Does It Work?

Abstinence is 100% effective in preventing pregnancy. Although many birth control methods can have high rates of success if used properly, they can fail occasionally. Practicing abstinence ensures that a girl won't become pregnant because there's no opportunity for sperm to fertilize an egg.

Protection Against STDs

Abstinence protects people against STDs. Some STDs spread through oral–genital sex, anal sex, or even intimate skin-to-skin contact without actual penetration (genital warts and herpes can be spread this way). So only avoiding *all types* of intimate genital contact — including anal sex and oral sex — can prevent STDs. This is called **complete abstinence**.

Consistent abstinence means that someone practices abstinence *all the time*. Having sex even once means that the person risks getting an infection.

Only **complete and consistent abstinence** can totally prevent pregnancy and protect against STDs. Because a person does not have any type of intimate sexual contact when he or she practices complete and consistent abstinence, there is no risk of passing on a sexually transmitted infection.

Abstinence does not prevent AIDS, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C infections that come from nonsexual activities, like using contaminated needles for doing drugs, tattooing, or injecting steroids.

How Do You Do It?

Not having sex may seem easy because it's not *doing* anything. But peer pressure and things you see on TV and in the movies can make the decision to practice abstinence more difficult.

If it seems like everybody else is having sex, some people may feel they have to do it, too, just to be accepted. Don't let kidding or pressure from friends, a girlfriend, a boyfriend, or even the media push you into something that's not right for you. The truth is that most teens are not having sex.

A couple can still have a relationship without having sex. If you've made a decision not to have sex, it's an important personal choice and the people who care about you should respect that.

You may have questions about making this choice or about other methods of birth control. Your doctor or nurse — or an adult you trust, such as a parent, teacher, or counselor — can help provide some answers.

Reviewed by: Rupal Christine Gupta, MD

Date reviewed: December 2016

Note: All information on TeensHealth® is for educational purposes only. For specific medical advice, diagnoses, and treatment, consult your doctor.

© 1995-2019 The Nemours Foundation. All rights reserved.

