

Prevention Research Center

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Young people engaging in sexual activity differ on definitions of virginity, abstinence

New study uncovers inconsistencies in teens' perceptions of sex

BERKELEY – Some teens believe they will stay virgins after engaging in oral sex, genital touching and even anal sex, according to a new study in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*. Also, nearly half of teens said intimate touching and oral sex were not considered sex.

Respondents ranged in age from 12 to 16 years old and differed on their notion of both abstinence and virginity. More than 83 percent of surveyed young people said a person was still a virgin if he or she participated in genital touching, and 70 percent said they believed girls and boys keep their virginity if they participate in oral sex. This pattern was consistent across gender, age group, ethnicity, and sexual behavior experience.

“A large proportion of young people believe even an intimate level of sexual contact is abstaining from sex and being a virgin,” said Dr. Melina Bersamin, Ph.D., lead study author. “Perhaps the overarching message is that there are different meanings associated with terms such as ‘have sex,’ abstinence, and virginity. When working with adolescents, it is important to specifically define what we mean by sexual behaviors to ensure a common understanding. This applies to doctors taking sexual histories, instructors delivering sex education or abstinence programs to youth, and to scientists conducting research.”

The study, carried out by the PIRE Prevention Research Center in Berkeley, interviewed middle and high school students regarding their perceptions of sexual activity and what constitutes “virginity” and “abstinence.” More than 900 adolescents from 10 California counties were interviewed using an in-home computer-assisted interview technique in which the young people answered questions directly on a computer, thus maximizing privacy.

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Researchers found definitions of abstinence among the young people were somewhat different. More than 44 percent of the youth respondents believed that a person who engaged in genital touching was abstinent while 33 percent believed that oral sex still constituted abstinence. Additionally, more than 14 percent of survey participants defined abstinence as including anal sex and nearly 12 percent said abstinence could include vaginal intercourse.

“Perceptions of sexual behavior differed somewhat based on the individual’s own level of sexual experience. Those who had engaged in a particular behavior are more likely to believe that engaging in this behavior did not preclude being defined a virgin,” Dr. Bersamin said. “Differences in definitions of abstinence were somewhat complex. Female respondents were more likely to view females who engaged in genital touching as abstinent. Older adolescents were less likely than younger peers to say girls and boys who engaged in vaginal intercourse or anal intercourse as abstinent.”

Ethnicity also predicted abstinence definitions. Specifically, white adolescents were less likely than non-whites to view those who engaged vaginal and anal intercourse as abstinent. Study authors emphasize that physicians and educators who work with adolescents need to be specific in their terminology if they are to communicate accurately with young people. These findings also point to the need for educational programs to discuss a wide range of sexual behaviors, including genital touching, oral and anal sex, and their potential psychological and physical risks. This is especially important given recent findings suggesting that some adolescents estimate little chance of contracting sexually transmitted diseases from oral sex.

For more information or to obtain a copy of the published report, contact Michelle Blackston at (301) 755-2444 or mblackston@pire.org. PIRE (Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation) is a national nonprofit public health research institute, supported primarily by federal and state research and program funds, with centers in seven locations around the country.

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