

Teens find the benefits of not having sex decline with age

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The percentage of teens who report solely positive benefits from not having sex declines precipitously with age, according to a new study by scientists at the University of California, San Francisco.

The finding suggests that adults should give teens guidance in coping with both the negative outcomes of engaging in sexual behaviors, and the negative experiences of refraining from them, the researchers say.

The study, reported in the January 2008 issue of the “American Journal of Public Health,” studied teens from the fall of their ninth-grade year through the spring of their tenth-grade year.

Among teens who remained sexually inexperienced during the study, the percentage reporting only positive experiences from refraining from sex fell from 46 percent to 24 percent.

Among teens who were sexually experienced at the outset of the study, the percentage reporting only positive experiences from refraining fell from 37 percent to 8 percent.

The greatest change in attitudes was among teens who became sexually experienced during the study period. For those teens, the percentage who said that not having sex resulted in only positive experiences dropped from 40 percent to 6 percent.

A comparison between the groups was also illuminating. Those

adolescents who were sexually experienced from the outset were more likely than those who remained sexually inexperienced to value refraining from sex (odds ratio 3.1 to 1.6).

“When we encourage teens to abstain from sex or delay becoming sexually active, we frequently over-focus on the health risks, such as unintended pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections,” said senior study author Bonnie Halpern-Felsher, PhD, a professor of pediatrics in the Division of Adolescent Medicine at UCSF.

“Young teens are aware of the health risks, but this study shows that teens are assessing how they feel about refraining from sexual behaviors based upon how having sex makes them feel – and those feelings become increasingly influential over time,” Halpern-Felsher said.

While research has examined how teens feel about becoming sexually active, the current study is the first to examine how teens feel when they don’t have sex, according to Sonya Brady, PhD, lead study author and a former UCSF post-doctoral fellow.

The study examined the attitudes of approximately 600 Northern California high school students. Study participants were divided into three categories: those who were sexually experienced at the outset of the study, in the fall quarter of the ninth grade; those who had become sexually experienced by the end of the spring quarter of the tenth grade; and those who remained sexually inexperienced throughout the ninth and tenth grades.

The study data was collected between 2002 and 2004 from a racially and ethnically diverse group of high schoolers who were mostly 14 years old at the start of the study. Fifty eight percent of the teens were female. Forty percent were Caucasian, 22 percent were Asian and 17 percent were Hispanic, with the remainder being of other racial groups.

In the study, researchers asked participants to fill out survey questionnaires that asked about the positive and negative consequences of refraining from sexual activity. Sexual activity was defined as having either oral or vaginal sexual relations. Positive consequences of not having sex included ‘having a good reputation,’ ‘friends were proud,’ and ‘felt responsible.’ Negative consequences included ‘partner became angry,’ ‘felt regret,’ ‘felt left out’ and ‘felt like you let your partner down’. The participants were surveyed every six months.

Those who were sexually experienced were more likely than the other groups to value refraining from sex. By the spring of the tenth grade, these teens were twice as likely to report a positive outcome from not having sex, when compared with adolescents who became sexually experienced during the course of the study.

Although more research is needed to understand why that might be the case, say Brady and Halpern-Felsher, they say that sexually experienced teens may reflect upon their past experiences and come to value selectivity about sexual partners or appropriate occasions for engaging in sex.

“Refraining from sexual behavior should feel rewarding, and engaging in sexual behavior should be based on maturity and readiness,” Brady said.

“We often focus on abstinence in sex education programs. It may be that, when we do this exclusively, we’re not meeting the needs of those adolescents who choose to be sexually active, and may be failing to give them the tools to select the most caring partners for them, the right occasions for engaging in sex, and the best strategies for engaging in safer sexual behavior,” she said.

Source: University of California - San Francisco

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