

Teenagers attending college less likely to engage in risky sexual behavior

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Adolescents attending college six months after completing high school are significantly less likely to engage in risky sexual behavior than those who do not go to college, according to the first study to directly compare the two groups.

The University of Washington study, published in this month's issue of the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, also compared risky sexual behavior of teens living at home and those who established their own residences and found no significant differences between the groups, said Jennifer Bailey, a research scientist with the UW's Social Development Research Group and lead author of the paper.

"No one has compared typical teens before, because we stop being so concerned about their sexual behavior after they leave high school," said Bailey. "But it is important that we know what they are doing because late adolescence and the early 20s are the peak times for acquiring a sexually transmitted infection.

"HIV is a big risk. Chlamydia can affect fertility. The prevalence of gonorrhea and chlamydia are increasing. And some forms of human papillomavirus are related to cervical and other cancers. So it is important that we know what puts young people at risk for these sexually transmitted infections and what social structures may help protect them."

The study found that college students were more likely to always use a condom and less likely to engage in casual sex or high-risk sex than teens

who did not attend a two- or four-year college.

For this study, casual sex was defined as having sex with someone not considered to be a boyfriend or girlfriend, having sex with someone they had known for less than two weeks or having more than one sexual partner in the previous month. Criteria for high-risk sex included casual sex and inconsistent condom use, as well as having sex with a man who had sex with other men or having sex with a partner who was HIV positive or who was an intravenous drug user.

Overall, the study showed that:

23 percent of the college students reported inconsistent condom use compared to 35 percent of the non-college subjects.

15 percent of the college students engaged in casual sex vs. 29 percent of the others.

5 percent of the college students had high-risk sex vs. 16 percent of the others.

53 percent of the college students engaged in sex in the previous month vs. 70 percent of the others.

The finding that living at home did not confer defense against risky sexual behavior was unexpected.

"It was surprising to us that there wasn't a protective effect of living at home for risky sexual behavior," said Bailey. "Overall, adolescents who live with parents are less likely to be sexually active, but those who are having sex are just as likely to engage in risky sexual behavior.

"Generally what students do six months after graduation is what they did in high school. The kids who were doing risky sexual behavior in high school are continuing to do it. And the kids who were engaging in that behavior in high school generally are less likely to go to college," she said.

While the study focused on the differences between college and non-college attendees, data showed drug and alcohol use in high school was an important contributor to risky sexual behavior. Those who used drugs, alcohol or marijuana in high school were six times as likely to engage in casual sex and four times as likely to engage in high-risk sex behavior as non-users. Bailey said the findings emphasize the need for continuing efforts for HIV and sexually transmitted disease prevention programs in high school and beyond.

"We need these programs because those people who are reporting more risky sexual behavior are those who are at the highest risk for sexually transmitted diseases. There is an easy way to reach the kids who go to college and there are all kinds of resources there for them," she said.

"The others are harder to reach with a prevention message once they are out of high school. Thirty-five percent of the teenagers in our study who weren't in college reported inconsistent condom use. That's important. We need to continue to try to reach young people who put themselves at risk."

Source: University of Washington

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