

Study examines link between teen sex and divorce rate

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A University of Iowa study found that women who make their sexual debut as young teens are more likely to divorce, especially if "the first time" was unwanted, or if she had mixed feelings about it.

Published in the April issue of the *Journal of [Marriage and Family](#)*, the analysis found that 31 percent of [women](#) who had sex for the first time as teens divorced within five years, and 47 percent divorced within 10 years. The divorce rate for women who delayed sex until [adulthood](#) was far lower: 15 percent at five years, and 27 percent at 10 years.

Author Anthony Paik, associate professor of sociology in the UI College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, examined the responses of 3,793 ever-married women to the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth.

A first [sexual experience](#) that was unwanted or not completely wanted was strongly associated with divorce. If the [young woman](#) chose to lose her virginity as a teen, the results were more nuanced.

When the first intercourse took place early in adolescence -- before the age of 16 -- the women were more likely to divorce, even if that first sexual experience was wanted.

If the young woman waited until age 16 or 17 and the first sex was wanted, there was no direct link to dissolution down the road. But, while the sex itself did not increase the likelihood of a marital split, other factors related to sexuality -- such as a higher number of sexual partners,

pregnancy, or out-of-wedlock birth -- increased the risk for some respondents.

Thirty-one percent of women who experienced adolescent sexual debut had premarital sex with multiple partners, compared to 24 percent of those who waited. Twenty-nine percent experienced premarital conceptions, versus 15 percent who waited. And, one in four women who had sex during their teenage years had a baby before they were married, compared to only one in ten who held off.

"The results are consistent with the argument that there are down sides to adolescent sexuality, including the increased likelihood of divorce," Paik said. "But there's also support for the 'more sex positive' view, because if a teen delays sex to late adolescence and it is wanted, that choice in itself doesn't necessarily lead to increased risk of divorce."

Only a small percentage of women who had sex before age 18 said it was completely wanted. Just 1 percent chose to have sex at age 13 or younger, 5 percent at age 14 or 15, and 10 percent at age 16 or 17. Another 42 percent reported first sexual intercourse before age 18 that was not completely wanted, while the remaining portion of the sample waited until age 18 or older to have sex (wanted, 22 percent; unwanted, 21 percent).

Paik said there are a couple potential explanations for the link between teen sex and divorce.

"One possibility is a selection explanation, that the women who had sex as [adolescents](#) were predisposed to divorce. The attitudes that made them feel OK about having sex as teens may have also influenced the outcome of their marriage," Paik said. "The other possibility is a causal explanation -- that the early sexual experience led to the development of behaviors or beliefs that promote divorce."

In a statistical analysis, he found more evidence for the latter, suggesting that the sexual experiences as a teen affected the marriage. The results related to unwanted sex supported his hunch. Nevertheless, he cautions that it is too early to rule out the selection explanation.

"If the [sex](#) was not completely wanted or occurred in a traumatic context, it's easy to imagine how that could have a negative impact on how women might feel about relationships, or on relationship skills," Paik said. "The experience could point people on a path toward less stable relationships."

Limitations of the study included a lack of information on respondents' work status, which is often used as a control factor in divorce research, and the fact that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data included some imputed values. Paik arrived at the same results by excluding the imputed figures, but would like to repeat the study with the new 2006-08 data to confirm that the findings still hold.

"It's a timely topic, given the current debate over the sexualization of girls," Paik said. "This study tries to provide some answers about adolescent sexuality and the risk of marital dissolution, and the results show that both the context and early onset of first intercourse are associated with [divorce](#)."

Provided by University of Iowa

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