

Nearly 30 percent of teens involved in sexting despite being 'bothered' by requests: study

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Teens are sexting -- and at higher rates than previously reported. In the first study of the public health impact of teen sexting, researchers found that close to 30 percent are engaging in the practice of sending nude pictures of themselves via email or text. Further, the practice is indicative of teens' sexual behavior overall and, particularly, girls' participation in risky sexual behaviors.

These findings, from a University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston study that is the first to explore the public health impact of sexting, are published in the July 2 issue of [Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine](#).

Researchers surveying nearly 1,000 students at seven public high schools in southeast Texas found that 28 percent of [adolescents](#) have sent a nude pictures of themselves through electronic means; more than half (57 percent) have been asked to send a nude picture; and about one-third (31 percent) have asked for a nude picture to be sent to them.

These rates are at the higher end of other estimates generated from available online research and polls and substantially higher than recently published peer-reviewed data suggesting that only a little more than one percent of teens had sent naked pictures. The authors note that the current findings, based on a much larger and more diverse sample than those used in previous research, provide a more accurate depiction of U.S. adolescents' sexting behaviors.

"It appears that sexting is a modern version of 'show me yours and I'll show you mine,' but the commonness of the behavior does not condone its occurrence. On the contrary, we found that teens are generally bothered by being asked to send a naked picture," said lead author Jeff Temple, UTMB assistant professor in the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology. "In fact, nearly all girls were bothered by having been asked, and among boys, more than half were bothered at least a little."

The researchers also examined the association between sexting and sexual activities and found that male and females who engaged in a variety of sexting behaviors were overwhelmingly more likely to have had sex than their peers who have not experienced sexting.

Moreover, teen girls — but not boys — who engaged in sexting had a higher prevalence of [risky sexual behaviors](#), including multiple partners and using drugs or alcohol before sex. Temple believes this gender difference may be attributed at least in part to social beliefs about sexting, particularly that it may be perceived permissively and positively for boys and thus, not considered risky or to be associated with other dangerous behaviors. Girls, on the other hand, may be perceived as promiscuous if they sext. If willing to risk reputation, they may be inclined to take other risks as well.

"Pediatricians, policy makers, schools and parents have been handicapped by insufficient information about the nature and importance of teen sexting," said Temple. "These findings shed new light on the public health importance of this increasingly common behavior and we hope that the data contributes to improved adolescent health care."

Because the findings posit that sexting may be a fairly reliable indicator of [sexual behavior](#), Temple advises pediatricians and other tween- and teen-focused health care providers consider screening for sexting

behaviors and use it as an opportunity to discuss sexual behavior and safe sex — reinforcing similar recommendations by the American Academy of Pediatrics. He adds that parents should also counsel their teens about these issues and that a discussion about sexting may be a less intimidating door opener to a talk about sex.

Temple further noted that these findings, namely the ubiquity of sexting, support recent efforts to soften legal penalties of this behavior for juveniles. "If our findings were extrapolated nationally, under most existing laws several million teens would be prosecutable for child pornography or other sexual crimes," he said. "Doing so not only unjustly punishes youthful indiscretions, but minimizes the severity and seriousness of true sexual assault against minors. Resources currently used to criminally punish teen sexting could instead be diverted to prevention and education programs focusing on reducing risky sex behaviors among adolescents."

A follow-up study exploring the psychological impact of sexting is underway. Temple added that other future research should include longitudinal studies that explore whether adolescents' sexual experiences and engagement in risky sexual behavior precede or follow [sexting](#) behaviors and qualitative studies that include more contextual questions.

More information: *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med.* Published online July 2, 2012. doi:10.1001/archpediatrics.2012.835
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