

Teens on Safer Sex, Condoms and "the Pill"

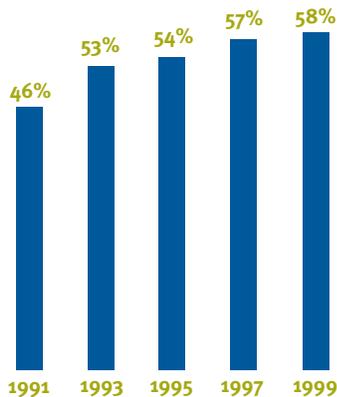
Teens today are coming of age at a time when HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are a constant consideration for anyone who is sexually active. It is estimated that a quarter of Americans living with HIV/AIDS became infected before they turned 20 years old. And, more than 4 million new cases of STDs among teens will be diagnosed this year alone.



The good news is that many teens are waiting longer before having sex. When they do, more are using protection, and increasingly they choose condoms (Figure 1). However, many teens still "risk it" every now and then, often forgoing protection altogether or relying on less effective methods. Teens' decisions about their sexual health are at least in part shaped by their perceptions about "safer sex," condoms and other forms of birth control, like "the Pill," which include a combination of fact and fiction.

This national survey examines teens' knowledge and attitudes about "safer sex" and contraception, and how these factors influence their choices. It is the second in a series conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation and *seventeen* magazine.

FIGURE 1. Teen Condom Use on the Rise
Percent of 9th–12th grade students who said they used a condom the last time they had sexual intercourse...



Source: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (1999). *Youth Risk Behavior Trends, from Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 1991, 1993, 1995, 1997, and 1999.*

Safer Sex, Condoms and "the Pill"

A Series of National Surveys of Teens about Sex

sexsmarts
a public information partnership



SexSmarts is an ongoing public information partnership between the **Kaiser Family Foundation** and **seventeen magazine** to provide young people with information and resources on sexual health issues. The campaign addresses a range of topics from decision making about sex, including how to say no, to the real facts on HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

Under the partnership, the Foundation and *seventeen* periodically survey teens about their knowledge and attitudes about sex and sexual health. These nationally-representative survey snapshots shed light on issues teens need more information about. The campaign also includes special articles in the magazine, an online monthly column on *seventeen.com*, and other consumer education materials.

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What Teens Say about “Safe (or Safer) Sex”

“Safe sex” is a familiar phrase to most teens. They know that abstinence is the most effective way to prevent pregnancy and disease. Three quarters say that if you are having sex, using a condom is a good choice (Figure 2), and about half of teens say using birth control pills is “safe (or perhaps, at least safer) sex.” One in five teens consider oral sex to be “safe sex.”

Two thirds of teens aged 15-17 say that they use some method of protection *every time* they have intercourse (only 12% say they *never* do). Over the last decade sexually active teens have increasingly used condoms. In 1991 less than half of teens said they had used a condom the last time they had sexual intercourse. By 1999, that number had grown to close to 60 percent. According to the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth, condoms are teens’ first choice for protection, followed closely by birth control pills.¹

The large majority of teens say a condom should be used *every time*, even by those who haven’t had a lot of sexual partners. But teens don’t necessarily follow their own good advice: nearly half admit to having had sex without a condom. Some are relying on more risky options, like the “rhythm method” or withdrawal, or using nothing at all (Figure 3).

Perceptions on Protection

A range of perceptions (and *misperceptions*) influence teens’ choices about contraception. Although most teens know birth control pills, while an effective method for pregnancy prevention, do not protect against disease, a sizable minority (about two in five) doesn’t know for sure, or thinks that “the Pill” may prevent HIV/AIDS and other STDs. And, while medical evidence suggests that the health benefits of taking birth control pills outweigh the risks, and that “the Pill” actually offers some protection against health conditions like ovarian cancer and osteoporosis, two in five teen girls are worried about possible negative health consequences of using this method.

FIGURE 2. **Staying Safe**
Percent of teens who say “safe sex” is...

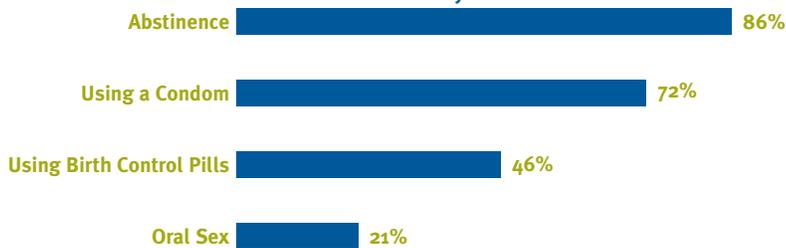
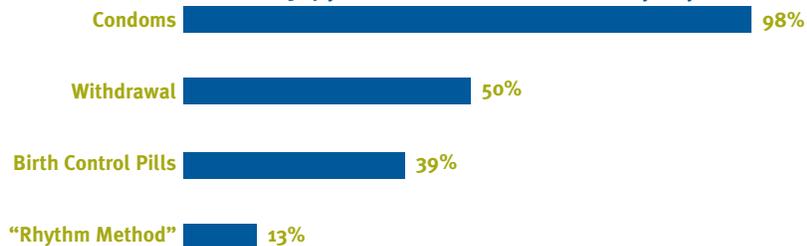
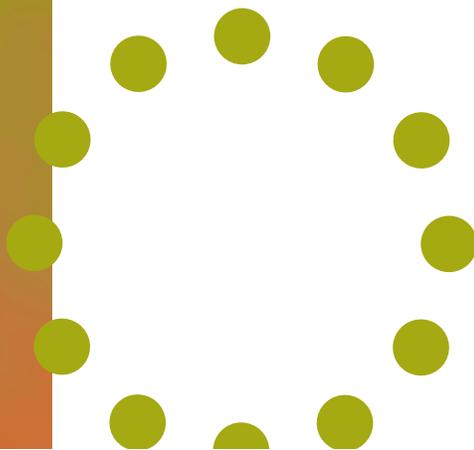


FIGURE 3. **Risky Business**
Percent of 15-17 year olds who have had sex who say they have *ever* used...



67% of sexually active teens say they use some type of birth control or protection *every time*



¹ Terry, Elizabeth, and Jennifer Manlove (2000). *Trends in Sexual Activity and Contraceptive Use Among Teens*. Washington, D.C.: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

Teens are also concerned about how well condoms protect against disease and pregnancy. One third believe condoms are “not too” or “not at all” effective in protecting against HIV/AIDS and other STDs; 15 percent say they are not effective at preventing pregnancy (Figure 4). Nearly a quarter believe that condoms break so often that “they are not worth using;” however, in typical use, only 14 women in 100 become pregnant in the course of a year when using condoms as their method of protection.²

Few teens know about emergency contraception options that can help prevent an unwanted pregnancy if

a condom *does* break, or if another form of contraception fails. There are now two products available by prescription that are specifically designed for use as emergency contraception. Additionally, certain brands of oral contraceptives (also prescribed by a doctor) when taken within 72 hours of unprotected sex have been found to be up to 75 percent effective at preventing a pregnancy from occurring.³



² United States (1998). *Contraceptive Technology (18th Edition)*. Rockville: United States Food and Drug Administration.

³ *Ibid.*

FIGURE 4. Perceptions on Protection
Percent of teens who say birth control pills and condoms are “effective” in preventing...

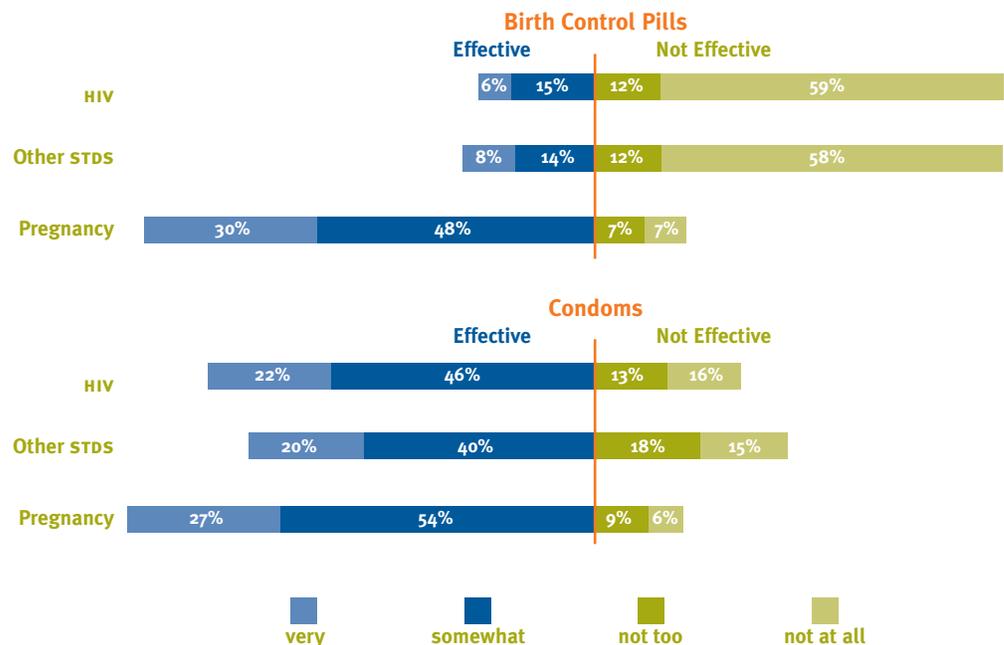


FIGURE 5. What Matters?
Percent of teens who say their decisions about what type of contraception to use are influenced by...

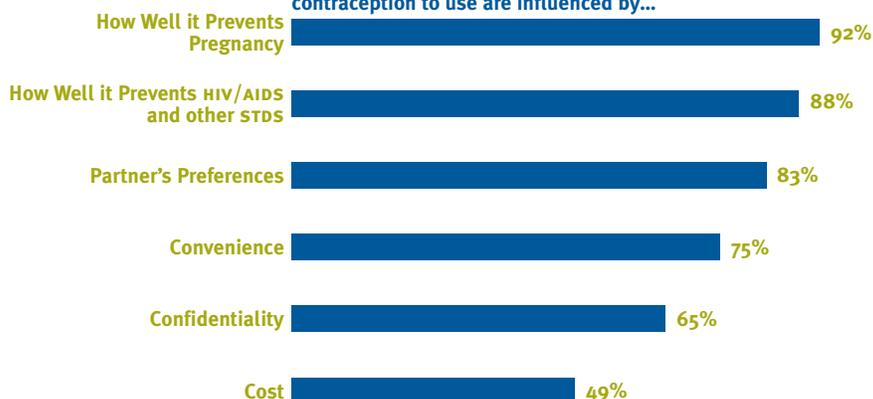
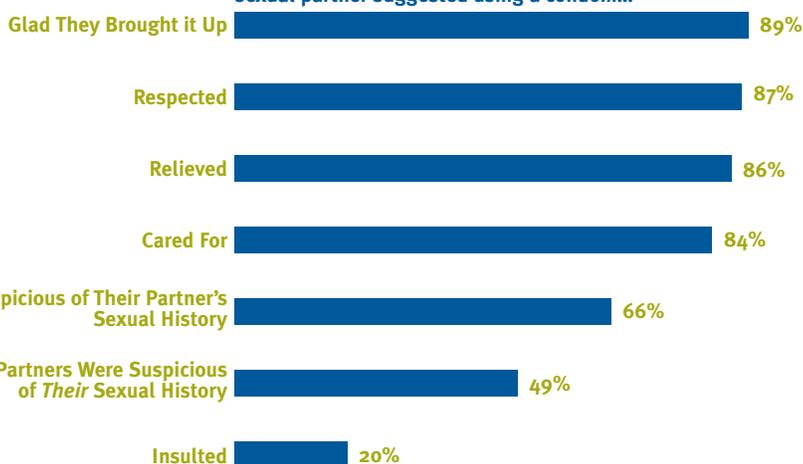


FIGURE 6. Mixed Signals?
Percent of teens who say they would feel the following if a sexual partner suggested using a condom...



Convenience, Cost and Confidentiality

Teens say their top priority when choosing a method of contraception is pregnancy prevention, followed closely by how well it protects against disease. Also important to many teens are convenience, confidentiality and cost (Figure 5). Teens overwhelmingly—75 percent—want a method that is “easy to get.” Sixty-five percent say it’s important to them to choose a method that they can get without their parents knowing. Half say cost also matters.

What their partner wants to use is also important to *both* teen boys and girls. However, half of girls worry about having to talk about contraception with their partners—saying, in fact, that they would prefer to use an option that their partner didn’t know about.

Mixed Signals?

Many teens are concerned about the implicit messages they think using a condom may convey about their partner’s—or their own—sexual history. Two thirds say if a partner suggested using a condom they would be “suspicious” about that person’s sexual history; half would be worried about what it meant about what their partner thought about

them (Figure 6). But, the survey suggests teens could put to rest these fears if they just talked more openly with one another. Nine in 10 teens say if a partner suggested using a condom they would be “glad [the other person] brought it up.” In fact, the large majority says they would feel “cared for,” “relieved,” and “respected” by this request.

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