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Sexual Behavior And Identity In Young Americans

By Catherine Pearson

The CDC released a new report today, “Sexual Behavior, Sexual Attraction and Sexual Identity in the U.S.,” which looks at sexual activity in young Americans -- some 13,500 of them, age 15 to 44. Among the big highlights? Abstinence is up among teens and 20-somethings, which could have implications for the state of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in the U.S.

The new study (which also looks at sexual attraction “trends” among 18 to 44-year-olds) comes on the heels of the biggest-ever sex health study, published last year in the *Journal of Sexual Medicine* (and sponsored by the makers of Trojan condoms), which revealed facts like the number of sexually active teenage males dramatically increases between the ages of 14 and 17.

So why should we care about the sexual behavior trends of this particular age group?

According to the CDC, the new data, compiled between 2006 and 2008, should prove particularly useful to public health researchers who want to better understand and target populations that are at high risk for contracting sexually transmitted infections -- i.e., teens. The center estimates there are some 19 million new cases of STIs in the U.S. every year -- over half of which occur among people age 15 to 24.

Which is why it's notable that abstinence seems to be on the rise among Americans within that age range. Bill Albert, chief program officer for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, told U.S. News and World Report that he is encouraged by the news that more teenagers and 20-somethings are abstaining. He says that the general view among adults has been that teenagers are having more and more sex, but the new data appears to contradict that.

Anjani Chandra, a health scientist with the National Center for Health Statistics, which helped compile today's report, told CNN that she has a slightly different take on the new information. By abstaining from vaginal intercourse, many teens think they're being safer and they certainly eliminate the risk of an unplanned pregnancy. But, Chandra says, if they engage in oral sex -- which the findings show many of them do -- they're still at risk for STIs.

One such STI that can spread through oral sex is HPV, the virus that can lead to genital warts and cancer in both men and women. Recent research suggests that HPV has infected 50 percent of men in the U.S. Scientists are currently working on tests that can help detect the virus in its early stages.