

Sex study: More teens, young adults are virgins

By Sharon Jayson, USA TODAY

A growing number of teens and young adults say they've never had sexual contact with another person, according to the largest and most in-depth federal report to date on sexual behavior, sexual attraction and sexual identity in the USA.

The study, released Thursday by the National Center for Health Statistics, reports that 27% of young men and 29% of young women ages 15-24 say they've never had a sexual encounter. That's up slightly from 22% for both males and females, in the government's last such survey released in fall 2005, based on 2002 data.

The new findings, from the 2006-2008 National Survey of Family Growth, look at responses from 13,495 teens and adults ages 15-44, including 5,082 ages 15-24.

"The perception is all kids are engaging in oral sex. Obviously, that's not the case," says Jennifer Manlove, a senior research scientist with the Washington, D.C.-based non-profit Child Trends, who studies teen sexuality. "They may be more in control of their behaviors than we think."

Age is a factor, says J. Dennis Fortenberry, an adolescent medicine specialist at the Indiana University School of Medicine in Indianapolis, who was not involved in the study.

"As young people progress through their adolescence, increasing proportions of them experience sexual relations with another person," he says. "Some young people make a strong commitment to not having sex for a variety of reasons and some take different paths."

Among ages 15-17 in the new study, 58% of girls and 53% of boys said they have had no sexual contact, compared to 48.6% of girls and 46.1% of boys in 2002. For ages 20-24, 12% of women and 13% of men said they have never had sexual contact, compared with 8% for both sexes in 2002.

Debbie Roffman, a human sexuality educator in Baltimore, says it does appear "that there is a trend toward postponement."

"As to why, there are certainly multiple factors at work," she says. "While greater caution due to fear of physical consequences is likely one, more positive factors are likely to be at play as well."

"For instance, more young people may be choosing to wait for a more quality sexual experience, knowing it is more likely to come with maturity, and/or greater involvement by parents in communicating about sexual values and decision-making and providing greater supervision and monitoring of their children's activities."

While changes from the earlier numbers are small, the new study goes into much greater detail and fills in many gaps in the 2002 data, says lead author Anjani Chandra. Definitions, including specific descriptions of behaviors such as oral sex, were included in the new report to avoid miscommunication, she says.

Questions were posed in both English and Spanish by in-person interviewers between June 2006 and December 2008; participants responded via laptop to protect their privacy. The same method was used in 2002.

Philadelphia-area psychologist Michael Bradley, who specializes in teens, says despite the survey's assurances of confidentiality, young people are not easily convinced and may underreport their sexual activity.

"There is some awareness of confidentiality concerns among a lot of kids," he says. "Some (researchers) are suggesting an underreporting of some behaviors. We don't know that, but we do see kids less inclined to disclose these things than in the past."

The report also found that more than half of 15- to 24-year-olds who have had oral sex reportedly engaged in this behavior prior to ever having vaginal intercourse. Among that age group, 62.6% of women and 64% of men said they had had any oral sex.

The 2002 survey was the first time the government asked about oral sex and when that data came out, there was con-

siderable discussion about the finding that more than half of teens had had oral sex.

The concern isn't just the semantic debate about whether oral sex is really sex — there are public health implications, researchers say. The report notes that a growing percentage of cases of genital herpes in the USA are attributed to oral sex. Other sexually transmitted diseases also can be spread by oral sex. Chandra says the information on what portion of young people have engaged in “potentially STD-risking behaviors before ever placing themselves at risk for pregnancy” will help the federal agency in planning prevention programs.

Although the new survey sought to determine the relative timing of oral sex and sexual intercourse for young people who reported sexual contact, Bill Albert, a spokesman for the nonprofit National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, says it's important to focus on the big picture.

“This suggests to me that when kids are sexually active there's a range of things they're doing,” he says.

The survey found that older ages at first intercourse were associated with higher percentages having had oral sex first. Of those 15-24 who had first vaginal intercourse at 17 or younger, 41% had oral sex first, compared with 70% of those who had first intercourse at age 20 or older.

“Those who were older at first intercourse were more likely to have engaged in other sexual activity (specifically oral sex) beforehand,” Chandra says.

Among other findings:

- Women ages 15-44 are more than twice as likely to have had a same-sex sexual encounter as men of the same ages. In 2006-08, 12.5% of women reported a same-sex experience, vs. 5.2% of men.
- Among men and women 18-44, 94% of women and 96% of men identified themselves as heterosexual while 1.1% of women and 1.7% of men said they were homosexual. The percentage of women who identified themselves as bisexual was more than three times that of men: 3.5% of women vs. 1.1% of men.

Kaaren Williamsen, director of the Gender & Sexuality Center at Carleton College in Northfield, Minn., says there are several reasons women report same-sex experiences at higher rates than men do.

“This data would support that it is more common for women to fluctuate and explore their sexuality. It's also more socially acceptable, so they feel like they could report it,” she says. “I do still think we have to consider the impact of internalized homophobia — that even for people who may have had a same-sex experience, admitting it, even anonymously, might not be possible. That could be impacting the difference (in study findings) between men and women.”