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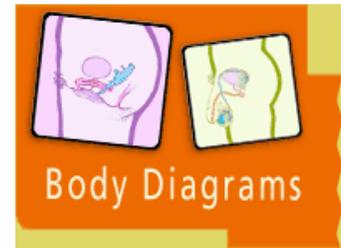
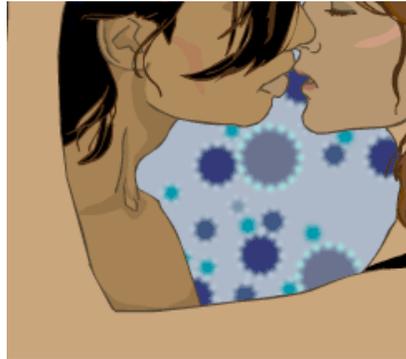
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Defining Virginity

Heather Boerner, 01.08.08

You've messed around. You've made out. But did it cross the line to sex?

That's the question that a new study in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* tackled. The study asked more than 1,000 teenagers between the ages of 14 and 19 what they'd have to do to lose their virginity and what counts as abstinence.

The study found:

- More than eight out of 10 teens (83.5 percent) believed they were still virgins if they had participated in genital touching.
- More than two out of three teens (70.6 percent) believed they would still be virgins if they had had oral sex.
- About one in six teens (16.1 percent) believed they could have anal sex and still be virgins.
- About one in 20 teens (5.8 percent) thought they could have vaginal intercourse and remain virgins.

Are You Experienced?

What determined teens' definition of sex? Sexual experience.

"The strongest predictor of whether they defined a behavior as sex was prior sexual experience," says Melina Bersamin, assistant professor of child development at California State University at Sacramento, and the study's primary author. "If they had engaged in genital touching, they were more likely to believe they had retained their virginity. If they had engaged in oral sex, they were more likely to believe they had retained their virginity. We're not exactly sure why, but we think maybe they're justifying their behavior — 'It's okay, because I'm still a virgin.'"

Regardless of sexual experience, however, teens did agree about vaginal intercourse. Teens who had vaginal intercourse and teens who didn't agreed that virginity does ends with it.

Protect Yourself

No matter how you personally define losing your virginity, you still have to think about protecting yourself from sexually transmitted infections (STIs). For example, unprotected oral sex — whether performed on a guy or a girl — can put partners at risk for STIs, whether they are giving or receiving oral sex. Oral sex is not as risky for STIs as vaginal or anal intercourse are. But to further reduce the risk, you can use a Glyde dam, cut-open condom, or plastic wrap to cover the vulva or anus, or a condom to cover the penis.

It's important to know that what you're doing can affect your physical and emotional health, says San Francisco-based sexuality health educator Ivy Chen, who regularly talks to teens about sex and teaches a class at San Francisco State University on healthy relationships.

What Else Do You Need to Know?

related links

- [Losing It: All About Virginity](#)
- [Foreplay 411: Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Not Doing It](#)
- [Who's a Virgin?](#)

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What determined teens' definition of sex? Sexual experience.

"If teens are not given comprehensive sex education or another forum in which to talk about sex, they go from being ignorant teens to ignorant adults," Chen says. "People have different definitions of what behaviors count as 'real sex' and different motivation for having sex. First, we need to define sex and why we have sex for ourselves, and then extend that conversation to our partners."

One question Chen likes to ask teens is, "What will make sex good for you?" She wants to help teens figure out what they need sexually so they can set standards for themselves.

Usually the answers include

- Knowing that you're ready.

Is having sex now in sync with your personal values and goals? Are you ready to be very clear about what you want and don't want to happen? Are you and your prospective partner on the same page about your relationship?

- Having an appropriate partner.

"However long or short the relationship, I always stress that an appropriate partner should be someone you treat with respect and honesty, and who treats you the same way," Chen says. "Even if you're not professing your love for them, as long as both of you agree on what the sexual behavior means to both of you emotionally, they can be an appropriate partner."

- Having a safe and comfortable place to have sex.

"If you were to plan it, I think you might prefer someplace that's safe, private, and comfortable," Chen says. "Not where you're in a half-drunken state at a party, where you don't have control of the situation, or where you're somewhere in public where it's not safe."

- Having the appropriate protection.

This includes condoms, birth control, and having access to emergency contraception — [the morning after pill](#) — if something goes wrong. "Some sex educators have suggested that if a condom is more than an arm's length away, you won't use it," Chen says. "Sex is so wrapped up in approval and lust and fear that a person may not want to risk breaking the mood to step away to get a condom."

- Having accurate information.

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