

Practicing Abstinence

Another aspect of the emotional changes that occur during adolescence is an awakening of feelings of sexual attraction toward others. These feelings are a normal and healthful response and are part of becoming a healthy adult.

HEALTH TERMS

abstinence

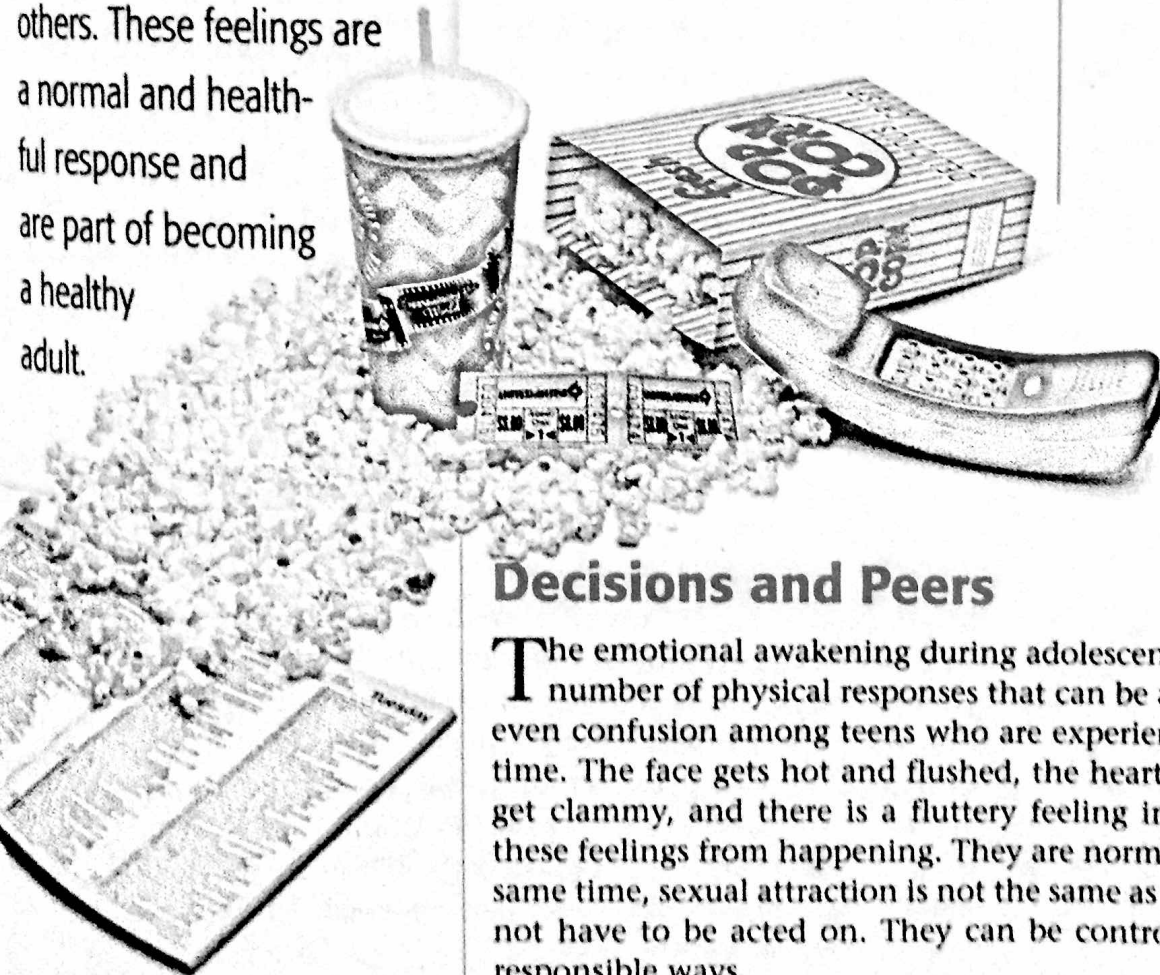
priorities

self-control

sexually transmitted disease (STD)

HEALTH CONCEPTS

- Sexual activity before marriage carries a number of serious health risks, particularly for teens.
- Abstinence from sexual intercourse before marriage is the only safe and responsible choice.



Decisions and Peers

The emotional awakening during adolescence is accompanied by a number of physical responses that can be a source of concern and even confusion among teens who are experiencing them for the first time. The face gets hot and flushed, the heart beats faster, the hands get clammy, and there is a fluttery feeling inside. You cannot keep these feelings from happening. They are normal and healthful. At the same time, sexual attraction is not the same as love. Sexual feelings do not have to be acted on. They can be controlled and dealt with in responsible ways.

Decisions About Sexual Activity

In our society, physical attraction and sexual activity are portrayed in movies, on television, and in advertisements. Perfume commercials describe their products as *sexy* or *alluring*. Some TV programs

now carry warnings about containing “partial nudity” and “explicit sexual content.” Whether out of curiosity, a desire to be an adult, or pressure by others, some teens are tempted to be sexually active. However, there are many consequences of these actions.

One of the biggest decisions any teen can make is whether or not to become sexually active. Being sexually active can have implications for life—not just for a moment. Because people do not think clearly when faced with sexual feelings, it is much easier and a lot smarter to think through a decision about sexual behavior before getting into the situation in the first place.

Abstinence Until Marriage

More teens are examining the risks of sexual behavior and deciding that the only safe and responsible choice is abstinence from sexual intercourse. **Abstinence** is *the conscious decision to avoid harmful behaviors, including sexual activity before marriage and the use of tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs.* Abstinence is the only healthful and safe choice for teenagers. By postponing sexual activity until marriage, teens avoid the many risks of sexual behavior such as unplanned pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and loss of self-respect.

Making a Commitment to Abstinence

Practicing abstinence takes planning, preparation, and self-control. Here are the steps you can follow to help you practice abstinence:

- **Establish your priorities in life.** Priorities are *those things that are first in importance.* To set priorities, give some thought to your plans for the future. Think about the goals you have set for yourself, such as going to college or pursuing a particular career. Also think about such personal values as respect, honesty, and morality. Consider the effects of an unplanned pregnancy or an STD on your life, and what it might do to your plans.
- **Set personal limits on the ways in which you are willing to express affection.** Base these limits on your priorities for your life. Make sure you set limits in advance, not when in a situation where your sexual feelings are beginning to build.
- **Share your feelings with your boyfriend or girlfriend.** Tell your partner about your priorities and what your limits are. Be honest about your feelings and values. If you are unable to talk openly and honestly with your partner, you are not in a mature, responsible relationship.
- **Discuss your feelings and concerns with a trusted adult.** Talking with a parent, teacher, or other trusted adult can be a release valve for pent-up fears or frustrations you may have. Remember, your parents and other adults have lived through adolescence themselves. They may offer suggestions for demonstrating affection in safe and healthful ways.

- **Steer clear of high-pressure situations.** When possible, go out on dates in a group. Avoid dark rooms and unsupervised parties. If you are in a car, avoid parking in a secluded spot. Do not use alcohol or other drugs, which can interfere with your ability to think clearly and make rational judgments.
- **If you are currently sexually active, re-evaluate.** One way of doing this is to avoid those places and situations that led you to being sexually active in the past.

Using Refusal Skills

Once you have decided to practice abstinence, you must communicate that decision clearly. This is another area where verbal and nonverbal messages may cloud the issue. One person may give a convincing no, but the nonverbal actions send a conflicting message. This confusion, added to the tension of the moment, makes communication difficult.

Before finding yourself in this situation, talk to your partner about your decisions. After stating your position simply but firmly, you may be relieved to find that your partner agrees with you. Having discussed the matter, you will find it easier to exercise **self-control**, a person's ability to use responsibility to override emotions. First, insist on stopping. Then back away from your partner and explain why you want to stop.

If your partner persists, you will need to become more assertive. Say no, and make sure your body language supports your verbal message.

Consequences of Sexual Activity

Sexual involvement has a number of negative consequences for which teens are not prepared—physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, and financially. These include an unplanned pregnancy, **sexually transmitted diseases**, loss of self-respect, and negative effects on social relationships.

UNPLANNED PREGNANCY

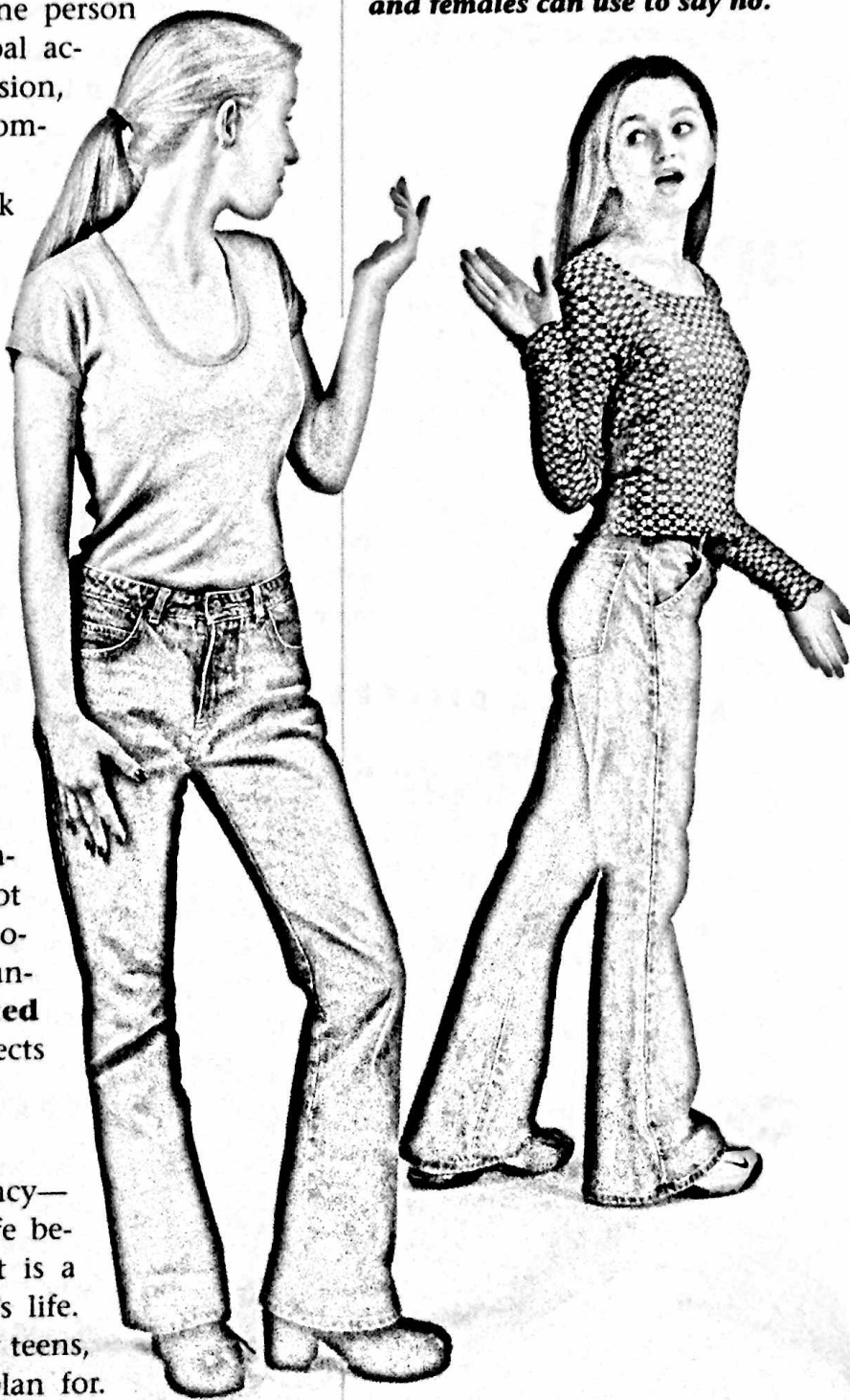
Adolescence is a full-time job. Add pregnancy—and the birth and care of an infant—and life becomes very complicated. Becoming a parent is a serious responsibility that changes a person's life. Teens are not ready for parenthood. For many teens, pregnancy is a consequence they did not plan for.

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sexually transmitted diseases (STD) For more information on avoiding sexually transmitted diseases (STD), see Chapter 29, page 642.

▼ **Make decisions based on your own values, even if your peers disagree.**

ACTIVITY Practice some effective refusal skills both males and females can use to say no.



Eighty percent of teen pregnancies are unplanned pregnancies. Having a child at a young age risks the health of the teen mother and her child. It also limits a teen's future. Many teen parents have had to drop out of school to support a child, or give up plans for college or job training.

SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES (STDs)

A **sexually transmitted disease** is an infectious disease that is spread from person to person through sexual contact. People in the 15–19 age group have the greatest risk of getting STDs. Nearly 3 million adolescents contract an STD each year. One in four sexually active adolescents will become infected before graduating from high school. STDs require medical treatment. Some STDs, such as **acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS)**, which is caused by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), are fatal. STDs can also render a person sterile, making it impossible for her or him to ever conceive a child.

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AIDS For more information on the problems associated with the AIDS epidemic, see Chapter 30, page 656.

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▶ Looking at the Issues

“Hanging Out” On-Line: Is It Safe?

These days, an increasing number of teens are turning to on-line connections as part of their social life. Some use their computers to meet and “hang out” with other teens in forums and chat rooms. Other teens even “date” in cyberspace. The growth of these trends has raised questions about their safety and healthfulness.

ANALYZING DIFFERENT VIEWPOINTS

▶ Viewpoint One

In one national teen survey, 7 out of 10 teens opposed any attempts to limit their access to the Internet. They believe that they are old enough to choose and judge responsibly whom they meet and talk to—including people they meet on-line.

▶ Viewpoint Two

Many teens, adults, and experts alike voice the opinion that there is no substitute for conventional in-person introductions, talking, and hanging out. They contend that you can tell more about a person by looking into his or her eyes than by the way he or she constructs a sentence. Another problem is that some people who meet and “date” on-line are not who they say they are at all.

EXPLORING YOUR VIEWS

1. What are the pros and cons of communicating with other teens in cyberspace? What safeguards can teens take when logging on?
2. What advice would you give to a peer about how to have responsible relationships?

LOSS OF SELF-RESPECT

Engaging in sexual activity goes against many people's values and religious beliefs. A teen may find himself or herself sneaking around or lying to parents or other adult family members about his or her whereabouts. Coupled with the constant fear of being caught, such actions and feelings can lead to guilt and regret, which can be emotionally harmful to a teen. Having and following clear values leads teens to healthy feelings of self-respect. You build character and feel good about yourself when you follow your values.

NEGATIVE EFFECTS ON SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Sexually active teens also risk developing a reputation among peers as someone who is "sexually easy" and may find it difficult to build new and healthy relationships in the future.

Choosing to become sexually active can even complicate the relationship with one's partner. When sexual activity is involved, expectations in relationships often change. Many teens have found that, instead of bringing them closer together, sexual activity actually tears the relationship apart.

FAMILY DISAPPROVAL

As **protective factors** in a teen's environment, most parents and guardians show their love and concern for their children by setting limits and establishing guidelines. Because parents want to protect their teens' self-respect, values, and safety, they do not want their teens to be sexually active. Going against such values can lead to feelings of parental disillusionment, disappointment, and even betrayal.

Did You Know?

- 1 in 4 teens in the United States who is sexually active gets a sexually transmitted disease.
- 1 in 5 girls who are sexually active gets pregnant.
- Up to 20 million Americans are infected with genital herpes.
- Around the world, maternal mortality rates for mothers ages 15–19 are double the rates for mothers ages 20–24.

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protective factors For more information on protective factors and their effect on the risk-taking behavior of teens, see Chapter 1, page 20.