

Abstinence

Sexy & Smart



What's Right for You?

Some people have strong feelings about abstinence based on religious and moral beliefs, and the word means different things to different people.

This publication looks at abstinence from a health standpoint, rather than a moral one. It will give you important information that you can apply along with your own moral beliefs to come to a choice that's right for you.

What Do We Mean by "Abstinence"?

The widely respected birth control reference manual, *Contraceptive Technology*, defines abstinence as "no vaginal or anal intercourse".

Why no anal intercourse? Because anal intercourse is an extremely risky practice in terms of the transmission of sexually transmitted infections including Hepatitis B and HIV/AIDS. It doesn't matter whether you're gay or straight — it's the behaviour that puts you at risk, not who you are.

Although it's rare, it's also possible for anal intercourse to result in

pregnancy, because sperm can leak out of the anus and into the vagina, and then go on to impregnate the woman.

The definition of abstinence proposed above is an excellent definition in terms of health, except for one thing — it tells you only what you can't do. It doesn't even hint at the wide range of sensual activities that are still open to you.

Why Do Some People Choose Abstinence?

There are lots of wonderful reasons to choose abstinence. For some it's a way of life, while for others it's a temporary choice. Some people

choose abstinence because they want to:

- wait until they're older
- wait for a long term relationship
- avoid an accidental pregnancy or sexually transmitted infection
- follow religious or cultural expectations

Others find that they enjoy other sexual activities more than intercourse. As a matter of fact, when sex therapists treat people who have sexual difficulties, often one of the first things they do is recommend that the couple stop having intercourse and explore other forms of sensuality instead. This can enrich the sexual experience tremendously.

Other people choose to put their energy into things other than sexual expression, such as creative pursuits or work.

All of these choices are perfectly legitimate; you need to make the choices that are right for you. That might include intercourse or it might not, but you don't have to justify your choice to anyone.

It's Smart

Choosing forms of sexual expression other than vaginal or anal intercourse is a great way to avoid some major health consequences — unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections such as chlamydia, gonorrhea, and HIV/AIDS.

It's Sexy

Abstinence doesn't have to mean shutting off your sexuality. In fact, intercourse is just one tiny aspect of sex, like one tiny planet in a vast galaxy of possibilities. Explore the other, highly erotic and safer “planets” to enhance your intimacy and your sex life.

Explore textures, temperatures, touch intensities, locations, massage, bathing together, feeding each other, flirting, role playing – There are a million possibilities!

With a little planning, communication and creativity, you can enjoy a very satisfying sex life without running the risks that accompany intercourse. Just make sure you're doing things that feel right for you.



But It's Not Foolproof

All this being said, it's important to note that abstinence does *not* protect you 100%. There are some activities that may put you at risk:

- A pregnancy could still result if there was any genital to genital contact or ejaculation near the vaginal opening.
- Also, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) can be passed on if there is any:
 - ejaculation near the vaginal opening
 - genital to genital contact
 - unprotected oral sex

Some STDs (such as crabs and herpes) can even be passed on by skin-to-skin contact without an exchange of body fluids.

Lots of times (some studies say about 17% of the time), abstinence fails just because couples end up

going further than they planned. This can happen if:

- they get caught up in the moment
- one partner is pressured or forced by the other
- they get drunk or high
- one partner feels a need to have sex in order to feel loved or to keep the relationship

Some of these issues are easier to deal with than others. For example, it may be fairly easy to limit the amount of alcohol/drugs you use. Likewise, you can prepare for getting caught up in the moment by carrying condoms. However, other issues can be more difficult and may require help from a trusted friend or professional.

When abstinence fails, pregnancy is always a possibility. If this happens, you might want to consult a physician about emergency contraception pills, which must be taken within 72 hours (3 days) of unprotected intercourse.

However, one slip doesn't mean you can't be abstinent in the future. Review your reasons, decide what you really want, and go for it. Abstinence takes time, practice, confidence and communication.

Practicing Abstinence Effectively

Abstinence doesn't just happen. Saying 'no' to intercourse isn't enough. You have to think about it, make a plan, and follow through. You need to:

- define abstinence for yourself. Decide which sensual activities you want and don't want. This is setting your sexual limits or boundaries.
- get clear about why you've made the choice to be abstinent.
- talk to your partner about what you want and don't want and why. This will help them understand.
- ask your partner what they want. What are their reasons?
- make a decision about sexual activity that's right for both of you.

Sound scary? Well, here are some suggestions to make it a little easier. You could:

- talk about what you want before you get into a hot and heavy situation.
- slide into the subject by mentioning another couple or a movie you saw, or even showing your partner this handout, and then talk about yourself.

- talk about sex in a general way, and then move into talking about your feelings and wishes.
- write down your thoughts and feelings to clarify them in your own mind. You may choose to share these with your partner, or not.

Talking about your choices is important, and your body language can reinforce what you say. Show your partner what you want – move their hand to where you want to be touched, or move it away.

Remember, abstinence can be a sensual, exciting choice at any time in your life. You decide what you want... what's right for you. You don't have to justify your choices to anyone but yourself.

For more information

Decisions about sexual health matters can be challenging, and you may need to talk them over with someone who can give you accurate information and help you figure out what's right for you.

The resources listed below may help you. But please remember – These decisions are yours to make, no one else's. If anyone tries to pressure you into a choice that doesn't feel right, walk away. Find someone else to talk to who will respect your right to have accurate information and then choose for yourself.

The expression of your sexuality is deeply personal. Take the time to consciously choose what you want – few people regret having sex too late, but many regret getting into things too quickly.

University Health Centre
2nd floor, SUB
Phone: 492-2612

Student Health Resource Centre
2nd floor, SUB
Phone: 492-2612 ext. 2300

Planned Parenthood Edmonton
423-3737

Capital Health Birth Control Centre
413-5735

STD Centre 427-2834

Web Sites for Help in Sexual Decision Making

www.ualberta.ca/healthinfo – “It's Your Call: Making Sexual Decisions” – an interactive guide through the steps of making sexual decisions that are right for you

www.goaskalice.com – Columbia University's excellent question-and-answer site