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Five Myths About Sex

By Susan Flinn

Think you know everything you need to know about sex? You might not. Below are five of the most common myths about sex that are floating out there among teens. Read on.

1. You can't get pregnant the first time you have sex.

Wrong. You can get pregnant (or impregnate someone) anytime you have sexual intercourse. It doesn't matter if it's your first time, your second time, your 10th time, or your 50th time. "It's easy to get pregnant," says Kim Compoc, a health educator at Health Initiatives for Youth in San Francisco, Calif. "Pregnancy happens when sperm from the penis gets into the vagina and connects with the woman's egg." How long you've been sexually active has no bearing on the process. Neither does the sexual position you use, or whether you're in love with your partner.

In fact, a girl can get pregnant before she has her first period. That's because ovulation (the release of an egg from the ovaries) occurs before menstruation. Many girls ovulate before their first period. If a female ovulates and then has intercourse, sperm can swim up the fallopian tubes and connect with the waiting ovum, resulting in pregnancy.

The only sure way to avoid pregnancy is not to have sex. If you have sex, the best way to avoid pregnancy is to correctly use an effective form of birth control such as a latex condom.

2. Birth control is all you need to protect yourself.

No. Taking oral contraception (the pill) or emergency contraception (the morning-after pill) prevents pregnancy. So does using a spermicide. But not one of those forms of contraception protects you or your partner from sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Using a latex condom will protect both of you from STIs, and will also prevent a pregnancy from happening. Again, the only sure way to prevent both pregnancy and STIs is not to have sex.

3. Condoms aren't reliable because they break.

False. When used properly, condoms prevent the transmission of STIs and pregnancy 98 percent of the time. When a condom fails, it's usually because it wasn't used properly. For example, it was put on too late or it was put on incorrectly. Before using a condom, both you and your partner should read the directions on the box and

follow them each time you have sex.

The other important thing to remember is that latex condoms prevent STIs, but lambskin condoms don't. "There are studies that show if a person with HIV has sex with a HIV-negative partner using a latex condom, the negative person doesn't get infected," says Compoc.

4. You can tell if someone has an STI by looking at them.

Nope. While the disease AIDS can have clear signs, like sores or lesions, other STIs don't have symptoms. For example, half the men and 75 percent of the women infected with the STI chlamydia never had symptoms. Other STIs have symptoms that can be hard to detect. One symptom of the human papillomavirus (HPV) is genital warts, but sometimes the warts are too small for the human eye to see.

Keep in mind that teenagers do get STIs. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimates that there are 3 million new cases of STIs among teens each year. So since you often can't tell if someone has an STI — and many people don't tell their partners that they are infected — the safest and smartest thing to do is not to have sex. If you have sex, use a latex condom and talk to your partner about STIs. "You need to communicate with your partner at all times," Compoc says. "If you have an STI, telling your partner about it lets them know that you care about them."

5. Oral sex is always safe.

Wrong again. It's true that you can't get pregnant or impregnate someone from oral sex. And the chances of getting an STI from oral sex are lower than from sexual intercourse. But having unprotected oral sex exposes you to other STIs, including gonorrhea, herpes, and syphilis. "You don't need an exchange of bodily fluids like what happens during intercourse to get herpes or syphilis," says Compoc. "These are diseases with open sores, so skin-to-skin contact is all you need to pass it on to someone." You can even contract AIDS through unprotected oral sex, although the chances of that happening are slim.

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