

# Abstinence

## What is abstinence?

Abstinence means making the decision **not** to do these types of sexual activity:

- direct touching of your partner's genitals
- vaginal sex (penis to vagina)
- anal sex (penis to anus)
- oral sex (mouth to penis or mouth to vagina)

Abstinence prevents pregnancy and the spread of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV.

If you choose not to have sex, you don't need to use birth control (contraception).

## How well does abstinence work?

8 to 9 out of 10 women will get pregnant in one year if they have intercourse and don't use birth control.

You can't get pregnant if you are abstinent (no genital contact). You can get pregnant if sperm is near the opening of the vagina.

If you are abstinent with **no** genital contact, you lower the risk of getting an STI. You can get some STIs by touching your partner's genital area.

## Why choose abstinence?

Someone may choose abstinence:

- to prevent pregnancy
- to prevent STIs and HIV
- for medical reasons
- short-term until a form of birth control starts working
- if he or she is not ready to have a sexual relationship
- for personal, family, religious, or cultural reasons

## How can I be abstinent?

- You can choose to be abstinent at any time, even if you have been sexually active before.
- Set your sexual limits and think about what sexual activity you are okay with. Talk with your partner about your choice to be abstinent and your limits.
- Sometimes it might be very hard to stick to your decision to be abstinent. Drinking alcohol or using drugs can affect your decision.

## What are the benefits of abstinence?

If you are abstinent and don't have sex (any type of sexual activity listed on page 1), there is:

- no risk of pregnancy
- a lower risk of getting HIV (because there is no exchange of body fluids)
- no or a low risk of STIs
- no cost to you (you don't have to worry about birth control or protecting yourself from STIs and HIV)

## What are the disadvantages of abstinence?

Abstinence works well to prevent pregnancy, STIs, and HIV. However, it can be hard to stay abstinent.

If you are thinking about having sexual intercourse, talk to your healthcare provider about ways to prevent pregnancy, STIs, and HIV **before** you have sex.

## Did You Know

- You have the right to make the decision to have sex or not.
- Plan ahead and decide to protect yourself to lower your risk of pregnancy, STIs, and HIV.
- It is important to talk with your partner about how you can protect each other.
- Sometimes it might be very hard to stick to your decision to be abstinent. Think about having a back-up method (e.g., condoms) with you in case this happens.
- Think about getting **emergency contraception** to help prevent pregnancy if you have unprotected sex.

## Websites

[www.myhealth.alberta.ca](http://www.myhealth.alberta.ca)

[www.sexualityandu.ca](http://www.sexualityandu.ca)

[www.teachingsexualhealth.ca](http://www.teachingsexualhealth.ca)

[www.albertahealthservices.ca](http://www.albertahealthservices.ca) and search for Sexual and Reproductive Health

For 24/7 nurse advice and general health information, call Health Link Alberta at 403-943-LINK (5465) in the Calgary area, 780-408-5465 in the Edmonton area, or 1-866-408-LINK (5465) toll-free.

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