



What Abstinence Is and How It Works

There are two types of abstinence. Both prevent pregnancy. Both keep sperm out of the vagina.

Periodic abstinence is a way that sexually active women prevent pregnancy. They become familiar with their fertility patterns. Then they abstain from vaginal intercourse on the days they think they could become pregnant.

Continuous abstinence is not having sex play with a partner at all. This is the kind of abstinence discussed here.

100 Percent Effective

Continuous abstinence What "qualifications" must someone meet before he or she is approved as prospective adoptive parents?

At most adoption agencies, adoptive parents go through a fairly lengthy process in order to become "approved." They attend group meetings and interviews. They complete a lot of paperwork, and they go through a "home study." Each agency prepares their families differently, but they all do their best to make sure the family is ready for a baby.

Advantages

Continuous abstinence:

- has no medical or hormonal side effects
- is endorsed by many religious groups

Everyone is sexual.

Practicing abstinence does not mean a person is sexless. Almost all women and men are abstinent at some time in their lives. It can be a positive way of dealing with sexuality — as a well thought-out choice regarding one's body, mind, spirit, and sexual health. Some abstinent women and men enjoy "sexy" thoughts and feelings. Others can use their sexual energy for creative, physical, or intellectual activities.

Special Advantages for Teens

Sexual relationships present physical and emotional risks. Abstinence is a very good way to postpone taking those risks until you are able to handle them.

Women who abstain until their 20s — and who have fewer partners in their lifetimes — may have certain health advantages over women who do not. They are less likely to:

- get sexually transmitted infections
- become infertile
- develop cancer of the cervix

Reasons Why People Choose to Abstain

Women and men abstain from sex play for many reasons — even after they've been sexually active. These reasons change throughout life.

People choose abstinence to:

- wait until they're ready for a sexual relationship
- wait to find the "right" partner
- support personal, moral, or religious beliefs and values
- deal with separation from a partner
- get over a breakup
- heal from the death of a partner
- have fun with friends without sexual involvement
- pursue school, career, or extracurricular activities
- prevent pregnancy
- prevent sexually transmitted infection
- follow medical advice during an illness or infection

Any woman or man can abstain from sex play. Many do so at various times in their lives. Some choose to do so all their lives.

Possible Problems

- People may find it difficult to abstain for long periods of time.
- Women and men often end their abstinence without being prepared to protect themselves against pregnancy or infection.



Staying Abstinent

Before you need to make a sexual decision

Women and men need to be clear about their reasons and values to stay abstinent. When you are in a sexual situation, it helps to be able to remember why you made the decision to be abstinent in the first place. How can you stay abstinent? Think about your answers to these questions:

- Am I aware of situations that could make staying abstinent difficult for me? Can I avoid them?
- I know alcohol and other drugs can affect my judgment and decision-making ability. How do I feel about not using them?
- Are there people in my life I can talk to about my decision to abstain from sex play? Will they be supportive?

When you need to make a sexual decision

Abstinence can be difficult for some people, especially in a sexual situation.

- Remind yourself why you chose to be abstinent.
- Think about the consequences.
- Don't reevaluate your decision to stay abstinent during sexual situations — stick with your decision until you can think about it with a clear head.

Most people stop being abstinent at some point in their lives. When you decide not to be abstinent, ask yourself:

- Do I have information about and access to other methods of birth control?
- Do I know how to protect myself from infection?

Talking About Abstinence

Talking with your partner about your decision to abstain from sex play is important. Partners need to be honest with each other and make sexual decisions together. These are some of the best ways to keep a relationship happy. Even so, it may not be easy to do. You may feel awkward or embarrassed.

It's best to talk about your feelings before things get sexual. For many people it's hard to be clear about what they want when they are aroused. It is helpful to think — ahead of time — about how you can say "no" to sex play. What behavior will be clear? What words will be best? You can practice

saying the words out loud. Then think about how someone could respond to you.

Take the time to consider fully what being abstinent will mean for you. It is important to know what you are thinking and feeling and what you need. Then you can tell your partner about it.

Be straightforward about the limits you want to set.

Being in a Relationship and Being Abstinent

Being sexual is not the only way two people can get to know each other. Sex play is also not the only way couples can be intimate, or close. People get closer as they build trust and intimacy by:

- talking
- listening
- sharing
- being honest
- respecting each other's thoughts and feelings
- having fun together

Abstinence can only work when both partners agree to it. So it is also helpful to keep talking to each other about why you've agreed to abstain from sex play. Your relationship may change. And your decision to be abstinent may change, too.

To decide which method to use now, consider how well each one will work for you:

- How well will it fit into your lifestyle?
- How convenient will it be?
- How effective will it be?
- How safe will it be?
- How affordable will it be?
- How reversible will it be?
- Will it help prevent sexually transmitted infections?

Your contraceptive needs may change throughout your life.

Cost

Most methods of birth control have some cost. Abstinence costs nothing.