



Ambiguity in Defining Adolescent Sexual Activity

Heidi Collins Fantasia, WHNP-BC, Holly B. Fontenot, WHNP-BC, Allyssa L. Harris, WHNP-BC, Lindsay Hurd, WHNP-BC, and Erica Chui, WHNP-BC

ABSTRACT

Historically, adolescent sexual activity has been narrowly viewed in terms of whether they are sexually active or not, with an inadequate focus on how *they* define their sexual behaviors. These dichotomous views of sexual activity fail to acknowledge the wide range of sexual behaviors that could increase the risk for sexually transmitted infections. Before nurse practitioners can begin to adequately assess sexual risk and meet the needs of their adolescent patients, they need to clearly understand what specific behaviors adolescents consider as sexual activity and acknowledge that these answers may vary widely.

Keywords: adolescents, sexual activity, sexual behaviors

© 2011 American College of Nurse Practitioners

A greater understanding of adolescent sexual behaviors is necessary for providers who interact with the adolescent population, and the World Health Organization (WHO) has included addressing the sexual and reproductive needs of adolescents as a crucial element of their Global Reproductive Health Strategy.¹ Historically, the study of adolescent sexual behavior has been motivated by public health concerns, such as the prevention of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), with a strong focus on epidemiology and the related consequences and health risks of engaging in sexual behavior. Consequently, sexual activity has been narrowly viewed in terms of whether adolescents are sexually active or not, with an inadequate focus on how adolescents define their sexual behaviors. These dichotomous views of sexual activity fail to acknowledge the wide range of sexual behaviors that could increase the risk for STIs. Therefore, a broader conceptualization of adolescent sexual activity is a neces-

sary first step to guide health care provider interactions with adolescents and move toward decreasing sexual risk.

SIGNIFICANCE

The onset of sexual activity among adolescents continues to be an area of concern because of the high rates of STIs and unplanned pregnancy within the population. According to recent statistics, approximately 1 in 4 (32 million) adolescent girls ages 14–19 years old is infected with at least 1 STI.² By age 25, this number jumps to 1 in 2.³ Additionally, each year approximately 750,000 United States adolescents become pregnant, representing the highest adolescent pregnancy rate of any developed country.⁴

BACKGROUND

There is a dearth of current research examining how adolescents define sexual activity. Available research has largely focused on abstinence, its meaning and definitions for individual adolescents, and the relationship of

current abstinence to engaging in sexual activity in the near future.⁵⁻⁷ Few researchers have examined behavioral definitions inside and outside the scope of abstinence and virginity.⁸⁻¹⁰

Ott et al⁷ examined adolescents' perceptions of sexual abstinence and found "marked confusion over the term abstinence" but choosing to or not to have sex was clear. Also, most of these adolescent participants viewed abstinence and virginity as interchangeable concepts, did not consider secondary abstinence (choosing to be abstinent after a period of sexual activity) to be true abstinence, and held very different views from adults. Similar confusion was also found by Goodson et al⁵ who asked adolescents to define the term abstinence and

also to define from what one abstains. Both positive and negative definitional patterns emerged. Adolescents who held positive views toward abstinence discussed being proactive and thoughtful about future sexual activity and also reported more positive attitudes in general. Those adolescents who viewed abstinence negatively discussed sexual activity in terms of avoidance and negation of something they desired.

In contrast, Masters et al⁶ discussed how adolescents did not consider abstinence and sexual activity as opposing constructs. Rather, they were able to identify complex links between both and did not only view abstinence as opposition to sex but were able to identify that abstinence and sexual activity can occupy different points in one's life.

Additional researchers have investigated adolescents' perceptions about what types of sexual activity one could engage in and still consider themselves to be abstinent. Among a cohort of female African American adolescents, a categorization of sexual behaviors emerged.⁹ For participants in this study, kissing, holding hands, and touching a partner on the genitals (clothed or partially unclothed) was considered abstinence, as was oral genital contact (oral sex). Some participants considered that those who engaged in anal sex but not vaginal sex were still practicing abstinence, and oral and anal sex acts were viewed differently than penile/vaginal intercourse.

In addition to abstinence, the concept of virginity and what it means to adolescents has also been investigated. In a study by Chambers,¹⁰ approximately 39% of respondents indicated that they considered themselves to be a virgin even though they had previously given or received oral sex. Similar results were found by Uecker et al¹¹ who investigated "technical virginity" and revealed

that adolescents may define virginity as persons who abstain from vaginal intercourse but who still participate in oral or anal sex.

It is apparent that, before clinicians can begin to adequately assess sexual risk and meet the needs of their adolescent patients, there must be a clear understanding of what specific behaviors adolescents constitute as sexual activity and acknowl-

edgment that these answers may vary widely. According to the Sexuality Information & Education Council of the United State (SIECUS),¹² a clearer understanding of sexual definitions is needed for adolescents. Without this clarification, key screening questions, focused exams, and correct diagnoses may be missed. Additionally, opportunities for expanded risk-reduction education may be missed without an awareness of what individuals view as sex.

The following case study presents 2 different scenarios to highlight the importance of clearly defining the meaning of sexual activity among adolescent patients.

CASE STUDY

Jessica is a 16-year-old female who presents to the clinic with vulvar irritation and discomfort for 1 week. She also reports vaginal discomfort and occasional mild dysuria but no changes in vaginal discharge or odor. She has no significant medical or surgical history, has not recently been ill, and is not taking any medications. Jessica reports that her menses are regular, occurring every 28-30 days and lasting 5-7 days. Her last menstrual period was 10 days ago.

Scenario #1

In order to assess Jessica's behavioral risk, the nurse practitioner (NP) asks the common gynecological question, "Are you sexually active?" Jessica responds quickly, "No,

Sexual activity is a spectrum of behaviors that should be defined as any sexual act that puts an individual at risk for pregnancy or an STI.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/2660147>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/2660147>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)