

Patient Information:

Abstinence

What is abstinence?

In terms of health and prevention of disease, abstinence means refraining from sexual intercourse, including vaginal, anal and oral intercourse. Many people use the word "abstinence" to mean different things. Some use it to mean avoiding any kind of sexual activity but others use it to mean avoiding intercourse only.

Your choice for abstinence is based on your personal values. Some choose abstinence when making decisions regarding intimacy to completely eliminate the risks of pregnancy or STDs that are associated with intercourse. For others, it's a commitment to their cultural, philosophical, or theological values. It could be a combination of personal reasons and emotional readiness.

Not everyone is ready to have sex. Since sexual behavior can be expressed in many ways, boundaries based on personal values, health risks, future goals, and the quality of the relationship should be considered. It is your body and your right to be respected for whatever decision you make. Non-penetrative safer sex (abstinence) can be fun and very intimate. There are hundreds of fun, intimate ways of making love "without doing it."

THE CHOICE TO BE ABSTINENT IS STILL AN OPTION EVEN IF YOU'VE ALREADY HAD SEX.

Secondary virginity is the term used for those who have already been sexually active but have made a decision to practice abstinence in the future. This allows them to focus on intimacy without intercourse. It's natural for people to reevaluate their choices and values based on new information or life experiences. What seemed right for a person at one point in time may not seem right for that person at another point in time. It's never too late to choose abstinence; your body always belongs to you.

How effective is abstinence?

Abstinence is the most effective birth control method and STD prevention strategy with no exchange of body fluids, no contact of genitals with body openings, and no genital skin to skin contact. It is commonly accepted as 100% effective, if practiced consistently. Only you can determine whether abstinence is a desirable and realistic choice for you.

How does it work?

- ◆ Abstinence is a choice. It is your right to make that decision and your responsibility to yourself to be well informed with correct and current information about sexual choices and consequences from a variety of sources.
- ◆ Evaluate the information carefully to determine the risks acceptable to you. Making a clear decision after a time of reflection can bolster the will to maintain your chosen boundaries when pressure might be applied to exceed those boundaries. Alcohol and drugs make it more difficult to abstain. Make your decisions and set your sexual limits before you get physically involved.
- ◆ Once you've set your sexual limits it is very important that you communicate them to your partner. Not having sex is O.K. and approximately **four out of every ten college students are abstaining.**

**Be creative and use your imagination.
Abstinence can be pleasurable and safe.**

What are the advantages?

- ◆ Fewer health risks
- ◆ No risk of STD's (with no exchange of body fluids and no genital skin to skin contact)
- ◆ No risk of pregnancy
- ◆ Allows time to get to know your partner and develop trust and closeness
- ◆ Abstaining puts you in charge of your body and feelings
- ◆ You can decide to be abstinent even if you've already had sex
- ◆ Love and intimacy without health risks
- ◆ Allows time for you to decide when you're ready (i.e. emotionally, physically, etc.)

Abstinence

- ◆ Helps you focus on other things and people in your life
- ◆ Less stress
- ◆ No birth control side effects
- ◆ Less expensive
- ◆ Self-respect for doing what's right for you
- ◆ Peace of mind
- ◆ No "morning after" regrets or guilt

1What is right for me?

2Whenever you make a decision regarding your body you should always consider the consequences of your actions and the pros and cons of your options. Answer these questions to help you evaluate your values, desires, and expectations and to help you decide if abstinence is the right choice for you:

1. Why be abstinent? How will I deal with my sexual feelings if I abstain?
2. Why have sex? Am I aware of the different consequences there might be? Will it make me feel guilty? How will I feel about my partner afterward?
3. What do I want from an intimate relationship? Will my needs be met by my current partner?
4. Do I share mutual respect and trust with my partner?
5. Do I feel comfortable with my present level of involvement with my partner?
6. What are my sexual boundaries?
7. Am I willing to communicate my decision to my partner? How will I deal with the possibility that my partner might not like my decision?
8. Is my decision consistent with my values? What about my future goals?
9. Can I commit to my decision?
10. Is my decision because of what I want or because I feel pressured by my partner or my peers?
11. Will I feel good about my actions afterward?

Those who make a decision for abstinence find it helpful to acknowledge that abstinence is a smart choice from the standpoint of safety and congruency with personal values. The choice of abstinence can be enhanced by personal commitment. It is often useful to have a plan formulated ahead of time that may be used in response to an intimate invitation. Don't feel pressured to argue or to explain your position. It is unloving and unethical for a partner to push, coerce, or force you to be sexual or intimate in ways not

comfortable for you.

Here are a few suggestions:

- ◆ Make sure you clearly let the other person know your limits; for example, say "no" clearly and definitively. Offer an alternative if you wish to have a different kind of contact with the person.
- ◆ Repeatedly state your sexual limits to a persistent partner. It may help you stick to your values and needs without being manipulated to do something you don't want to do.
- ◆ Get away from the situation and give yourself time to think about how to handle it.
- ◆ Communication is the key. You may find it helpful to be aware of inconsistencies in verbal messages versus actions that follow in the relationship. If you feel that a mixed message is being sent, express your confusion and ask for clarification of the other person's expectations.