

What is Abstinence?

Abstinence can mean different things for different people. It may mean no sexual contact of any kind or not having certain kinds of sex. For a variety of reasons, a person may choose abstinence at some point in their life. You can still choose abstinence even if you have had sex in the past. For birth control, abstinence means not allowing sperm (ejaculate or pre-ejaculate) near the vaginal opening (inside the vagina). For the prevention of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), abstinence means no genital-to-genital, or mouth-to-genital contact.

How effective is Abstinence?

If used consistently, abstinence is 100% effective at preventing pregnancy. If your definition of abstinence means no vaginal intercourse but includes other kinds of sexual activities, it is important to know that there is a small chance of pregnancy from a penis being rubbed near the opening of the vagina with no clothes in between, a partner ejaculating on the vulva, or from unprotected anal sex (if the penis slips or semen leaks down to the vaginal opening).

Advantages of Abstinence	Disadvantages of Abstinence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abstinence is free, always available, and can be started at any time in your life • Abstinence may encourage people to build relationships and connect more in ways that don't involve sexual activity • There are no medical side effects • May encourage different kinds of sexual exploration and expression other than intercourse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience shows that even people committed to abstinence may unexpectedly have sex and may not be prepared to protect themselves from pregnancy and STIs • Many people may find it difficult to maintain abstinence over the long term • Choosing abstinence does not mean that your desire for sexual activity goes away

Things to consider when using Abstinence as birth control

- Clear communication between partners is very important when practicing abstinence. Make a decision ahead of time which sexual activities you do and do not want to participate in.
- Even if you are practicing abstinence, it is good to learn about birth control and STI prevention for the future.
- It is safe to be on a birth control method even when practicing abstinence so that you are protected if sex does happen and so that you can get other benefits of birth control such as shorter and lighter periods. In fact, being on a method long term is safer than taking breaks.
- Have barrier methods (like condoms and oral dams) handy just in case sexual activity happens in the heat of the moment or you decide to no longer be abstinent.
- If sexual activity happens that may have a chance of pregnancy and you do not want to be pregnant, consider emergency contraception. STI testing is recommended for anyone who is sexually active, even if they are not having intercourse.

Questions? We're here for you!

We know it can be confusing to choose and use a method. We are here to help. You can visit one of our Options for Sexual Health Clinics to speak with a health care provider. Our Sex Sense Team is available Monday-Friday 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. by phone 1-800-739-7367 or by email at SexSense.org to answer your questions about birth control, or any other questions about sex, sexuality, or sexual health. This fact sheet contains general information and should not be used in place of individual consultation with a qualified healthcare provider. Updated August 2020