Dear Alice,

What is the average number of sexual partners per year for undergrads?

?Curious

Answer

Dear Curious,

The numbers in some recent research on this topic may surprise you. Several studies asked college students about their sexual behaviors in the past year. A study published in the Journal of College Health in 2005 surveyed undergrads from four college campuses during the spring and summer of 1999. The study found that over 80 percent of respondents had one or fewer sexual partners during the previous year. The 2004 University of Arizona Health and Wellness Survey of their student body found that 73 percent had one or fewer sexual partners. A 2001 study of students at Princeton University found that 79.3 percent of respondents had one or fewer sexual partners.

A 1998 study of a "Midwestern commuter college" found 68 percent of sexually active respondents reported having one sexual partner during the previous year. Eighteen percent of respondents reported having two partners. Interestingly, this study excluded from the analysis those who were abstinent during the preceding year.

While these studies do not provide an "average" number, it's clear that an overwhelming majority of students have had one or zero sexual partners over the past year. One must, however, be cautious with definitions?how, exactly, do the studies define sexual partners or sex in general? Does oral sex count? What about hooking-up? What exactly is hooking-up? Are the respondents assumed to be heterosexual? Or, do the studies differentiate between same and opposite sex encounters?

Another interesting finding is that students in the Princeton study and in the study of four undergrad campuses believed their fellow students had many more partners during the past year than the studies revealed. This shows that our perceptions (or fantasies) of what's happening between the sheets on campus are much more risqué than the actual details.

Alice!

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