College student sex stats: Am I the only one not doing it?

Dear Alice,

Do you know how many college students are having sex? Are there any statistics? I was wondering if it is lower than a lot of people would have you believe. I feel like I'm the only one sometimes who is not having sex. Thought maybe I'd see if it was true. Thanks.

Answer

Dear Reader,

Even if you were the only college student not having sex, that wouldn't make you "strange" or abnormal. You would just be doing what feels comfortable for you. People ultimately make their own choices based on many factors, including privacy, opportunity, finding a caring partner, cultural and/or religious beliefs, and trust levels.

Let's talk definitions: Although national statistics on college students' sexual behaviors are available, some studies ask generic questions about sexual activities. For many, especially college students, sex means different things to different people. For one person, sex may be mutual masturbation or vaginal intercourse. For another, it may include oral and/or anal penetration. As a result, how people define sex or interpret certain sexual behaviors shape their answers to the questions asked and what they believe other people are doing and in turn, how often they are doing it.

As far as numbers are concerned: When it comes to sex, or even alcohol and other drug use, perceptions of what college students think their peers are doing may not necessarily be what's real. So while it may seem that many college students are having sex, the research shows that many are not. Findings on this topic are reported in the American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment II (ACHA-NCHA II) year after year. The 2013 survey reports that many undergraduates (30 percent) didn't have any sexual partners during the previous year, and over half of those who are having sex didn't have oral or vaginal sex in the last 30 days. Also, among undergraduates having sex, most only had one sexual partner in the past year.

However, studies have demonstrated how college students' perceptions of their peers' sexual activity can be overestimated. The rates of ?hooking up? (again, a term subject to interpretation) among college students range from 53 to 76 percent. However, one study found that students surveyed believed that about 85 percent of their peers had ?hooked up?. Therefore, in this study, students had perceived that their fellow students were more sexually...
active than they actually were. In addition, studies have shown that young people also routinely report that they believe their peers are more comfortable with "hooking up" than they are themselves — another reason it's easy to think everyone's "doing it".

It's also good to keep in mind that research studies and what you hear on campus may be impacted by the society and culture in which you live. Those being surveyed may feel pressure to over- or under-report how many sexual partners they have and how much sex they are having because of social and/or cultural pressures and gender stereotypes. Men often feel like they "should" be having more sex and have more sexual partners, and women often feel pressure to be perceived as having less sex. This may affect the numbers seen in surveys and what you may be hearing on campus and from your friends.

But statistics can't tell the whole story about something as personal as sex. Instead of focusing on the stats, you might try directing your thoughts to quality instead of quantity. For example, do you feel ready to have sex? Are you excited about the prospect of having sex with your potential partner, and have you spoken with them about it? Do you feel respected by and safe with her/him, and vice versa?

You might also think of it this way: Plenty of people are talking about doing it, but you can't prove that they actually did anything. And, for a host of reasons, far fewer people are talking about not doing it. As a result, be assured you are not the only college student who is not having sex. Either way, it's important to be true to yourself — to have sex, the kind that you want, by yourself or with a consenting partner, when/because you want to, and not because of anybody else's behavior.

Alice!
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