

# *magical thinking*

*Young Adults' Attitudes and Beliefs About Sex,  
Contraception, and Unplanned Pregnancy*

*Results from a Public Opinion Survey*

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# magical thinking

*Young Adults' Attitudes and Beliefs About Sex, Contraception, and Unplanned Pregnancy*

*Results from a Public Opinion Survey*

## INTRODUCTION

At present, fully half of *all* pregnancies in the United States are unplanned. Among 20-somethings the rate is even higher—more than seven in ten pregnancies to single women in their twenties are unplanned. Moreover, at a time when the teen pregnancy rate has declined dramatically (down 36% between 1990 and 2004, the most recent data available), there has been no comparable progress among young adults.

Given the high rate of unplanned pregnancy among young adults, The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and *Self* magazine are pleased to present the results of a public opinion survey of young adults (ages 18-29) on relationships, sex, fertility, contraception, and unplanned pregnancy. It is our fondest hope that the results presented here will shed some light on the attitudes young adults have toward these important topics. We also hope these results will, in a modest way, offer some clues as to why the rate of unplanned pregnancy among single 20-somethings remains stubbornly high. Most of all, we hope that the results will be of interest to young adults themselves—that the findings will challenge them to carefully consider the critically important issues of relationships, contraceptive use, pregnancy, and family formation.

This public opinion survey was originally designed for internal use only—to provide The National Campaign with information and guidance for its overall program and mission. However, The National Campaign and *Self* found the results so compelling that we decided to release the results of selected portions of the public opinion poll.

Please visit [www.TheNationalCampaign.org](http://www.TheNationalCampaign.org) and [www.Self.com](http://www.Self.com) for more information.

## METHODOLOGY

This survey was conducted by TRU ([www.tru-insight.com](http://www.tru-insight.com)), a global leader in research on teens and 20-somethings. The survey was conducted online among a national sample of 2,282 unmarried adults ages 18-29 (see table below for additional detail). Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have volunteered to participate in TRU's online surveys. Respondents were stratified according to the U.S. Census and that data has been weighted to reflect the demographic composition of teens and young adults. Respondents do not constitute a probability sample. The survey was fielded between May 6, 2008 and May 17, 2008.

Readers should note that all the results presented here are for men and women ages 18-29.

TABLE 1: Survey Respondents, by Gender and Age

	Ages 18-20	Ages 21-23	Ages 24-26	Ages 27-29	TOTAL
Male	268	287	286	266	1,107
Female	288	309	291	287	1,175
Total	556	596	577	553	2,282

## KEY FINDINGS

Readers should note that all the results presented in this document are for men and women ages 18-29.

**Most young adults say they know quite a bit about some methods of contraception.** Significant proportions of young adults say they know either “everything” or “a lot” about some methods of contraception. For example, 89% of young adults (90% of men and 86% of women) say they know everything or a lot about condoms and 65% of young adults (78% of women and 52% of men) say they know everything or a lot about the pill.

**There are, however, far more methods of contraception about which young adults freely admit they know precious little.** For example:

- 70% of young adults (71% of men and 69% of women) say they know little or nothing about contraceptive implants,
- 67% (73% of men and 61% of women) say they know little or nothing about IUDs,
- 62% (59% of men and 64% of women) say they know little or nothing about the diaphragm,
- 59% (64% of men and 54% of women) say they know little or nothing about the vaginal ring, and
- fully one-third of young adults (32% of men and 30% of women) say they know little or nothing about emergency contraception.

**Pluralities of young adults say they don’t need more information about contraception.** Despite acknowledging that there are many methods of contraception about which they know little, nearly half of young adults (43% of men and 48% of women) say they do not seek out information about contraception because they believe they already know enough and/or don’t need additional information.

**Survey results suggest that young adults might benefit from additional information about fertility and contraception.** The National Campaign developed a set

of 11 relatively basic, straightforward questions to tease out how much young adults actually know about fertility and contraception (see page 15 for questions and results). For example, only half of women and one-quarter of men understand that it is not necessary to take a break from the pill every couple of years. On average, young adults answered less than half of the questions correctly (5.3 of 11).

**Women seem to be more knowledgeable than men about contraception.** Women (6.0) scored higher than men (4.7) on the eleven basic questions about fertility and contraceptive knowledge.

**Most young adults say they trust healthcare professionals more than any other source for information on preventing pregnancy and STDs...** A large majority of young adults (63% of men and 77% of women) say that a health care professional is their most trusted source of information about contraception. By way of comparison, only 5% cite friends as their most trusted source.

**...yet many say they rarely or never discuss these topics with a health care professional.** Despite citing health care professionals as their go-to source of information about contraception, more than eight in ten men (84%) and about one-third of women (35%) say they rarely or never discuss contraception with their doctor or other health care professional. Moreover, only 17% of men and 51% of women say that a health care professional has helped them select a method of contraception.

**Most young adults underestimate their chances of getting pregnant if they don’t use contraception.** Among couples who have sex regularly, 85% will experience a pregnancy within one year if they do not use contraception. Six in ten young adults (57% of both men and women) underestimate this risk.

**Contraceptive use varies with “main” partner and “non-primary” partner.** Two-thirds (66%) of young

adults say they use contraception every single time they have sex with their primary partner. However, less than half (47%) say they use contraception every single time with their non-primary partner.

**Fear of financial burdens and the responsibility of raising a child are the primary reasons young adults say they use contraception.** When asked to cite the motivations for using contraception, 80% of young adults say they are not ready financially and 76% say they are concerned about the cost of raising a child. Nearly seven in ten (69%) say raising a child is a responsibility they are not yet ready for and more than half (54%) say a child would get in the way of their education/career goals.

**Many young adults believe that condoms ruin sexual pleasure.** Forty five percent of young men and 38% of young women say that condoms ruin their sexual experience.

**A small but important percentage of young men say they only use contraception if their partner insists.** When asked if they agree or disagree with the following statement—I only use contraception if my partner insists—some 16% of young men say they agreed. An additional 15% said that they neither agreed nor disagreed.

**An overwhelming majority of young adults believe in planning pregnancies but many are resigned to experiencing an unplanned pregnancy.** Eight in ten young people (82% of men and 78% of women) believe that pregnancy is something that should be planned and more than six in ten (70% of men and 63% of women) believe that unplanned pregnancies are an important problem among unmarried people in their 20s. However, about 43% of young adults agree with the following statement: “I don’t want to get (my partner) pregnant but if it happens, it happens.”

### **Young adults say there are many reasons for the high rate of unplanned pregnancies in the United States.**

At present, fully seven in ten pregnancies among single, 20-somethings are unplanned. Young adults in this survey provided many reasons for this high rate of unplanned pregnancy:

- One in five (21%) cited improper or non-use of contraception,
- 16% carelessness/laziness,
- 14% the influence of drugs/alcohol,
- 12% lack of education/information,
- 12% no thought to the future/consequences, and
- 11% said that many young adults simply believe that an unplanned pregnancy won’t happen to them.

**An alarmingly high percentage of young adults believe that their friends have a casual attitude about unplanned pregnancy.** Only about half of men (58%) and women (52%) say that unplanned pregnancy is unacceptable among their friends.

Consider the following interesting findings:

- Sixteen percent of men and 13% of women think an unplanned pregnancy would give their life direction;
- Seventeen percent of young men say they don’t use contraception because they don’t think an unplanned pregnancy would happen to them;
- One in five young women (21%) believes that an unplanned pregnancy is not a bad thing; and
- Eleven percent of young men and 14% of young women believe getting (my partner) pregnant unexpectedly would not be a big deal.

## PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY RESULTS

Readers should note that all the results presented in this document are for men and women ages 18-29.

- Thinking about birth control/contraception/protection methods, how much would you say you know about each of the following? (Percentage answering that they know “everything” or “a lot” about the following methods of contraception.)

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
Male condoms	88%	90%	86%
The pill	65%	52%	78%
Withdrawal	64%	66%	61%
The morning after pill/Emergency contraception	32%	30%	34%
The patch	21%	17%	26%
Rhythm method (natural family planning)	16%	16%	16%
Vaginal ring/NuvaRing	16%	14%	18%
IUD	13%	11%	15%
Diaphragm	11%	14%	9%
Female condom	11%	12%	11%
Contraception implants	10%	10%	9%

- Thinking about birth control/contraception/protection methods, how much would you say you know about each of the following? (Percentage answering that they know “little” or “nothing” about the following methods of contraception.)

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
Contraception implants	70%	71%	69%
IUD	67%	73%	61%
Female condom	66%	66%	66%
Diaphragm	62%	59%	64%

3. Which of the following prevent you from seeking further information about birth control/contraception/protection, STIs, and pregnancy?

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
I think I know enough; I don't need more information	45%	43%	48%
It's too embarrassing to talk about	24%	27%	21%
It's too difficult to find the right resource	21%	24%	19%
It's too time-consuming	18%	20%	25%
I'm not currently sexually active	12%	12%	11%
I don't want others to know that I don't know	9%	11%	7%
It's not important to me	6%	9%	4%
Too expensive to get the information	6%	5%	8%
Already using birth control/happy with what I have	1%	0%	2%

4. Which of the following sources would you say you trust the most for information about the prevention of pregnancy or STIs?

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
Health care professional	70%	63%	77%
Mom	10%	10%	10%
Friends	5%	7%	3%
Sex education class	4%	6%	3%
Sex partner	4%	5%	3%
Internet	3%	4%	3%
Dad	1%	3%	--
Brother/sister	1%	1%	1%

5. Which of the following sources would you say you trust the most for information about the prevention of pregnancy or STIs? (Answers ranked #1-3 combined)

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
Health care professional	86%	81%	91%
Sex education class	50%	50%	50%
Internet	46%	47%	45%

6. How often do you talk to your doctor and/or other health care professional about birth control/contraception/protection? (Percentage that answered rarely or never)

ALL	MEN	WOMEN
59%	84%	35%

7. My doctor has helped me/my partner select the best birth control/contraception/protection method for me/my partner.

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
Agree	34%	17%	51%
Disagree	35%	48%	23%
Neither agree nor disagree	31%	36%	27%

8. Which of the following statements best complete this sentence: “When I have sex, my sexual partner or I...”

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
Use some form of contraception every single time	66%	63%	68%
Almost always use contraception, but not every time	18%	20%	15%
Use some form of contraception some of the time	5%	6%	4%
Rarely use any form of contraception	5%	4%	5%
Never use any form of contraception	7%	4%	9%

9. Now thinking about your other partner(s), which of the following statements best completes this sentence: “When I have sex, my sexual partner or I...”

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
Use some form of contraception every single time	47%	40%	59%
Almost always use contraception, but not every time	31%	39%	18%
Use some form of contraception some of the time	8%	9%	5%
Rarely use any form of contraception	12%	11%	15%
Never use any form of contraception	2%	2%	3%

## 10. The percentage of those ages 18-29 who agree with the following statements:

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
I am a planner in most aspects of my life	74%	71%	77%
Many people in my life have unplanned pregnancies	43%	39%	47%
It is okay for sex to be part of a casual relationship	54%	65%	43%
It is important to wait until you are in a committed relationship to have sex	47%	36%	57%
If I were to accidentally get pregnant, I would be able to handle raising the child on my own	na	na	44%
In life, things just seem to happen to me	34%	35%	33%
Among my friends, it is acceptable to have unplanned pregnancies	24%	20%	27%
At my age I just want to have fun; I'm not too concerned with the consequences	11%	17%	6%

## 11. Which of the following, if any, are very important to you to accomplish before having a/another child?

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
Financial security	88%	88%	88%
Employment	79%	82%	76%
Education	76%	76%	76%
Committed relationship	73%	73%	72%
Marriage	66%	62%	69%

12. Which of the following make you careful about using birth control/contraception/protection?

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
Not ready financially	80%	79%	81%
The cost of raising a child	76%	77%	76%
The responsibility of raising a child	69%	72%	66%
Not wanting a child to get in the way of the education or career I'm pursuing	54%	55%	54%
Not wanting to disappoint my friends/family with an unplanned pregnancy	47%	47%	47%
Don't think I'm ready to be a good parent	41%	44%	38%
Not wanting a child to cut into my free time/social life	39%	43%	36%
Don't think it would be good for a child to be born with unmarried parents	37%	39%	34%
An unplanned pregnancy would ruin the relationship I have with the partner that I get pregnant/the partner that gets me pregnant	17%	21%	12%
Fear of being stuck with my partner	16%	22%	11%
An unplanned pregnancy would ruin the relationship I have with other partners	8%	11%	5%
None of these	4%	2%	5%

13. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Using condoms ruins sexual pleasure.

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
Agree	42%	45%	38%
Disagree	39%	34%	43%
Neither agree nor disagree	20%	20%	19%

14. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I only use contraception if my partner insists.

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
Agree	10%	16%	5%
Disagree	78%	69%	86%
Neither agree nor disagree	12%	15%	9%

15. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I believe that pregnancy is something that should be planned.

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
Agree	80%	82%	78%
Disagree	5%	5%	5%
Neither agree nor disagree	15%	13%	17%

16. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Unplanned pregnancies are an important problem among unmarried people in their 20s.

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
Agree	66%	70%	63%
Disagree	11%	11%	12%
Neither agree nor disagree	23%	20%	26%

17. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I don't want to get (my partner) pregnant but if it happens, it happens.

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
Agree	43%	43%	43%
Disagree	34%	33%	35%
Neither agree nor disagree	23%	25%	21%

18. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: An unplanned pregnancy might help give me direction in life.

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
Agree	14%	16%	13%
Disagree	70%	66%	72%
Neither agree nor disagree	17%	18%	16%

19. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: I don't always use contraception but I still just don't think an unplanned pregnancy would happen to me (and my partner).

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
Agree	13%	17%	10%
Disagree	69%	62%	76%
Neither agree nor disagree	18%	21%	14%

20. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: For someone in their 20s, an unplanned pregnancy is not a bad thing.

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
Agree	19%	17%	21%
Disagree	54%	58%	49%
Neither agree nor disagree	28%	25%	30%

21. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Getting (my partner) pregnant unexpectedly would not be a big deal.

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
Agree	12%	11%	14%
Disagree	75%	77%	74%
Neither agree nor disagree	12%	12%	12%

## 22. The percentage of those ages 18-29 who agree with the following statements:

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
I believe in always being protected against unplanned pregnancies	81%	81%	81%
I worry about pregnancy more than I do about STIs	51%	49%	52%
Using condoms ruins sexual pleasure	42%	45%	38%
I worry about STIs more than I do about pregnancy	31%	32%	31%
I know contraception is important, but it's just too hard to use it every single time	17%	21%	14%
I/my partner would use better methods, but they cost too much	17%	19%	14%
Religion plays a large role in my decisions about contraception	15%	18%	13%
Contraception is not really important if you are in a committed relationship	12%	15%	10%
I only use contraception if my partner insists	10%	16%	5%

## 23. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: An unplanned pregnancy would really interfere with my plans.

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
Agree	76%	79%	73%
Disagree	11%	8%	14%
Neither agree nor disagree	13%	13%	14%

24. More than seven in ten pregnancies among unmarried women in their 20s are unplanned. Why do you think there are so many unplanned pregnancies among people in their 20s?

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
They don't use contraception or use improperly	22%	22%	20%
Carelessness	16%	13%	19%
Under the influence of drugs/alcohol	14%	16%	12%
People not taught prevention/not given enough information	12%	12%	13%
No thought to the future/consequences of actions/lack of planning	12%	11%	13%
People don't believe it will happen to them	11%	8%	15%
Casual sex/many partners/not valuing sexual act	8%	7%	8%
Thoughtlessness/lack of judgment/stupidity	7%	8%	6%
Lack of responsibility	6%	6%	6%
They are young/naive	5%	5%	6%
Enjoying sex/having fun/living life to the fullest	5%	5%	5%
People are sexually active/more sexually active at that age	5%	6%	4%
Caught up in the moment	4%	4%	4%
Society is too sexually oriented/society is to blame or has changed	4%	4%	3%
Too hard/too much of a hassle to use contraception/ruins the mood	3%	3%	2%
Birth control not affordable/too expensive	2%	2%	3%
In a committed relationship	2%	2%	3%
Seeking approval/want a relationship	2%	1%	3%
Birth control fails	2%	2%	2%
Lack of parental involvement or education	2%	1%	2%
They don't understand the risk	2%	1%	2%
The woman wants to be pregnant/have a child	1%	1%	2%
Promiscuous	1%	2%	1%
Influence of media	1%	1%	1%
No condom/contraception available	1%	1%	1%
Peer pressure	1%	1%	1%
Woman not assertive enough to insist on birth control	1%	1%	1%

25. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Among my friends it is acceptable to have unplanned pregnancies.

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
Agree	24%	20%	27%
Disagree	55%	58%	52%
Neither agree nor disagree	22%	23%	21%

## CONTRACEPTIVE KNOWLEDGE SURVEY RESULTS

The following 11 questions were posed to respondents in an effort to gauge young adults' actual knowledge about fertility and contraception.

1. True or False: A woman with a regular, 28-day cycle is most likely to get pregnant about two weeks after the first day of her period.

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
True ( <i>correct answer</i> )	50%	41%	58%
False	12%	14%	9%
Don't know	38%	45%	33%

2. True or False: Some types of birth control pills are only fully effective if they are taken within the same three-hour time period every day.

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
True ( <i>correct answer</i> )	63%	54%	71%
False	11%	12%	11%
Don't know	26%	34%	19%

3. True or False: An IUD can only be used by women who have already given birth.

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
True	10%	7%	14%
False ( <i>correct answer</i> )	34%	27%	39%
Don't know	56%	66%	47%

4. True or False: Pregnancy can happen even if a guy withdraws his penis before he ejaculates.

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
True ( <i>correct answer</i> )	91%	88%	94%
False	5%	8%	3%
Don't know	4%	4%	4%

5. True or False: Women taking birth control pills are at increased risk for all types of cancer.

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
True	23%	23%	23%
False (correct answer)	41%	33%	48%
Don't know	36%	44%	29%

6. True or False: It is necessary to "take a break" from the pill every couple years.

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
True	17%	21%	13%
False (correct answer)	38%	27%	49%
Don't know	45%	53%	37%

7. True or False: People shouldn't use petroleum jelly (e.g. Vaseline) as a lubricant when using latex condoms.

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
True (correct answer)	62%	61%	64%
False	12%	12%	11%
Don't know	26%	27%	25%

8. Among couples who have sex regularly, what percentage will get pregnant within one year if they use no birth control at all?

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
15%	5%	5%	4%
33%	20%	21%	19%
60%	33%	31%	34%
85% (correct answer)	31%	29%	32%
97%	12%	14%	11%

9. If taken within 72 hours of unprotected sex, emergency contraception is effective in what percentage of pregnancies?

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
25%	10%	12%	8%
58%	13%	16%	11%
70%	20%	21%	18%
89% (correct answer)	29%	24%	34%
99%	28%	27%	30%

10. A woman using the shot (Depo Provera) to prevent pregnancy needs to get the shot every \_\_\_\_ month(s).

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
1 month	8%	11%	6%
3 months (correct answer)	63%	55%	71%
5 months	22%	27%	18%
12 months	6%	7%	5%

11. Which type of birth control can women over the age of 18 get without going to a doctor or clinics?

	ALL	MEN	WOMEN
Emergency contraception (correct answer)	31%	26%	36%
Diaphragm	23%	30%	16%
The patch	8%	13%	4%
None of the above	38%	32%	45%



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## *About The National Campaign*

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy seeks to improve the lives and future prospects of children and families and, in particular, to help ensure that children are born into stable, two-parent families who are committed to and ready for the demanding task of raising the next generation. Our specific strategy is to prevent teen pregnancy and unplanned pregnancy among single, young adults. We support a combination of responsible values and behavior by both men and women and responsible policies in both the public and private sectors.

If we are successful, child and family well-being will improve. There will be less poverty, more opportunities for young men and women to complete their education or achieve other life goals, fewer abortions, and a stronger nation.

## *About SELF*

SELF debuted 29 years ago as the first-ever magazine of total well-being, merging beauty and health, fitness and nutrition, and happiness and personal style together in one package. Since the magazine's inception the achievement of well-being has become the cultural mantra of our time. SELF is a blueprint for the woman who wants to stay informed, get inspired, grow and achieve her personal goals. SELF reaches 6.5 million readers. For more information, visit [Self.com](http://Self.com).

## *About TRU*

TRU is the global leader in tweens, teens and twenty-somethings. For more than 25 years, we've provided the insights that have helped many of the world's most successful companies and organizations develop meaningful connections with young people. Our work has led to the development of countless new products, groundbreaking marketing campaigns, and flourishing brands.

TRU pioneered the field of youth research. More importantly, we continue to innovate. We're at the forefront of developing new and better methods for researching young people and sharing those insights with clients.