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The impact of the Internet on the sexual health of adolescents: A brief review

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Abstract

The object of this review is to summarize the impact of the Internet on the sexual health of adolescents. This article examines the use of websites, blogs and chat rooms as sources for sexual health information for adolescents. The influence of Internet pornography on sexual behaviors and attitudes is addressed. The use of the Internet as a place to find sexual partners is also assessed. During a time of great physical, emotional and sexual change, the Internet is playing a huge role in the decisions adolescents are making, both positive and negative.

Keywords: Adolescent, sexual health, Internet, pornography, relationships

Introduction

Media has always played a large role in the lives of adolescents. In recent years, the rise of new media has increased this role. New media includes the Internet—blogs, chat rooms, social networking sites and other websites (1). Approximately 75% of households and most schools have Internet access. This means that 93% of 9-17 year olds are online. Thirty percent of these adolescents have Internet access in their bedrooms, meaning that they are most likely unmonitored. These teens use the Internet at least four days per week for an average of two hours at a time (1).

All of this time on the Internet begs the question, what are adolescents doing online? Studies indicate that the most popular uses are looking up health information, school research, news information and information about movies, music and television (2). Adolescence is a time of much curiosity, especially regarding health, and 75% of youth, as of 2004, had used the Internet to look up health information (2). Two of the three most frequently researched topics on
the Internet regarding health are sexual health (such as sexual activities, pregnancy and contraception) and sexually transmitted diseases. Sexual health is an important area of interest to adolescents, and the Internet is providing information to them.

Young people turn to the Internet for information regarding sexual health for many reasons. One of the most important reasons is the anonymity that is given by the Internet. Many adolescents feel embarrassed and ashamed of sexual questions and do not want to approach their health care provider (3). It is also easy to access, free of charge and very interactive—aspects that are very important to adolescents (4).

Because of the large availability of information, interaction and media, the Internet is playing a huge role in the lives of adolescents—especially in their sexual health.

Internet as a source for sexual health information

Adolescents are undergoing physical, cognitive and social changes (4). These changes stimulate questions regarding health, relationships and sexuality. Because teens want a confidential source of information regarding these sensitive topics, the Internet is perfect. Adolescents turn to the Internet because of its safety, anonymity, constant availability and transcendence from adult control (1). Sources of information include web pages, bulletin boards, newsgroups, forums and chatrooms, to name a few (4). According to a study conducted concerning a popular health bulletin board, posts concerning questions about sexual technique, contraception and pregnancy garnered the most questions as well as views and therefore the most interest from adolescents (4). The fact that adolescents seek out important information online has proven to be both positive and negative.

On one hand, the Internet provides a place for adolescents to ask questions that they may not ask otherwise. Studies have shown that 41% of young adults changed their behavior, because of health information they found online, and almost half had contacted their physician as a result of the information (1).

Although the Internet can provide much needed health advice, it can also be negative. There is always the possibility that the information is inaccurate or misleading. In the realm of sexual health—especially sexually transmitted diseases and contraception—mistakes can be very costly, causing pregnancy or serious infections such as HIV (1). Many websites promote condom use and abstinence, but few share other safe strategies such as decreasing number of partners or delaying first intercourse (1). Also, teens with low health literacy are more likely to use slang terms when looking for sexual health information, which may expose them to less credible websites (1). While 57% of adolescents trust the advice they come across, there are no standards for what qualifies as credible in the world of the Internet (2).

While the Internet may provide information for teens regarding sexual health that information may not always be reliable. For this reason, it is important that adolescents check the reliability of the source as well as talk to their health care professional.

Internet as a source for pornography

While finding health information on the Internet can be positive and negative in the lives of adolescents, seeking pornography online is almost always detrimental. 42% of youth between the ages of 10 and 17 years have been exposed to online pornography in the past year (5). Out of these youth, 66% said that the exposure was accidental or unwanted (5). Compared with adolescents that have not been exposed to online pornography, those that had been exposed were more likely to have early coitus, have higher numbers of partners, use alcohol during sexual encounters and participate in anal sex (5). These behaviors are high-risk and put adolescents in danger regarding their sexual health.

Not only does pornography affect the behavior of adolescents, it also influences their attitudes and ideas. Adolescents who view online pornography are more likely to have less progressive gender role attitudes, condone extramarital sex and exhibit sexually permissive attitudes (6). Increased sexual permissiveness indicates that these adolescents believe that casual sex is acceptable, relationships with multiple partners are normal, and one-night stands are acceptable (6). Teens who view online pornography are generally not concerned with the
social consequences of their actions and have a skewed view of societal norms regarding sex (5). Because of this influence, these adolescents often participate in more high-risk sexual activities (6).

**Internet as a source for relationships**

High-risk sexual behaviors can impact an adolescent's entire life. Throughout adolescence and beyond, youth develop an interest in sex and relationships. While they show curiosity, they are often too shy to pursue it (7). The Internet allows adolescents to keep their sexual activities hidden. As was the case with sexual health questions, the Internet provides anonymity, perceived safety and ease of access when searching for sexual partners (8).

Unfortunately, the perception of safety is displaced. Studies show that young adults who seek sex partners online are at a greater risk for sexually transmitted diseases than their peers who do not seek sex partners online (8). Adolescents who seek sexual partners online are more likely to have early coital sex, more partners, and more anal sex than peers who did not have Internet partners. These outcomes are similar to the adolescents that viewed online pornography. However, the same adolescents were also more likely to use condoms during vaginal and anal sex, discuss STDs with their partner, and visit prevention oriented chat rooms (8,9). While high-risk behaviors were more prevalent with Internet partners, these adolescents were also practicing some safety measures.

**Conclusion**

Overall, the Internet is a catch-22 when it comes to the sexual health of adolescents. It provides adolescents with a confidential place to seek health information. However, it opens the door for adolescents to find incorrect health information, pornography and high-risk partners. It is clear that both benefits and detriments are present. It will be of great importance in future years to find a way to use the Internet to improve the sexual health of adolescents, rather than damage it.

**References**


