

The Importance of Sexual Health Media Message Box

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What is the problem we're addressing?

We live in a hyper-sexual world. Sex fills our magazines, TVs, movies, and minds; yet, **it's ironic that silence, stigma and shame often surround sexual health.**

As a result, many Americans are **not comfortable talking about or taking action** to improve their sexual health.

Being sexually unhealthy has serious consequences – physically, emotionally and financially. **The cost of silence is significant.**

Americans are eager to improve their sexual health; yet **they face many barriers** to building good relationships, protecting their bodies and accessing sexual health services. Talking about sexual health with partners, families and health care providers is often a challenge.

The bottom line: We are not a sexually healthy nation.

What is the solution?

America needs a different approach – a **positive** approach to sexual health. **An approach that focuses more on the “do’s” than the “don’ts.”** It's about honesty. It's about knowledge. It's about time.

It's time to recognize that sexual health is a **vital part of overall health and well-being** throughout our lives.

It's time to **break down the barriers** to sexual health, **just like we're reducing the barriers around other important health issues, such as mental health, cancer, and obesity.**

It's time to get comfortable talking about sexual health. **Let's change sexual health from “taboo” to “talked about.”**

We are not a sexually healthy nation. It's time to take the “Shhh”  **(silence) out of sexual health.**

What are the benefits?

The benefits of good sexual health go well beyond disease prevention.

Good sexual health is not just about preventing STIs or unplanned pregnancies.

There are many other good reasons to pay attention to your sexual health.

When people take care of their sexual health, they can be **healthier and happier.**

They can:

- Feel good about themselves and have peace of mind
- Have a healthier body
- Experience positive relationships
- Enjoy a more satisfying sexual life

A healthier America begins with a healthier attitude towards sexual health.

What is the call-to-action?

It's time to give sexual health the attention it deserves.

Taking care of your sexual health is more than what happens in bed.

It's time to turn on the lights, and take action both in and out of the bedroom.

Just like other aspects of our health – from keeping fit to managing your weight to preventing heart disease – **there are specific steps you can take to be sexually healthy.**

What steps can you take to improve your sexual health?

1. Value yourself and decide what's right for you
2. Get smart about your body and protect it
3. Treat your partners well and expect them to treat you well
4. Build positive relationships
5. Make sexual health part of your health care routine

It's time to talk about and take better care of our sexual health. **Make sexual health a priority.** To learn more, check out the National Coalition for Sexual Health at <http://nationalcoalitionforsexualhealth.org/>.

Proof Points: What is the problem we're addressing?

Many Americans are not comfortable talking about their sexual health.

Limited conversations about sexual health are taking place between parents and teens, partners, and health care providers and patients.

- Sixty-three percent of teens (up to age 19) report having sex, and the vast majority of young adults ages 20-24 are sexually active – 88% of women and 86% of men.
- About half of teens have never talked about sexual decision-making with their parents. This same age group often waits until after they've had sex to talk with partners about sexual health.
- Among older teens and young adults, 84% of men and 35% of women (ages 18-24) have never or rarely talked with their health care provider about their sexual health.
- Among older adults, only 38% of men and 22% of women have discussed sex with a physician since they turned age 50.

Many Americans are not getting services to protect their health.

- Over half of Americans are not getting preventive sexual health services. The low uptake of these services, which are recommended by leading medical organizations, is shocking.
- Among adolescents, only 33.4% of girls and 7% of boys have received all three doses of the HPV vaccine. Only 45% of Americans have been screened for HIV, even though testing is recommended for everyone at least once. Only 49% of sexually active women ages 16-24 were screened for chlamydia in 2012.
- Many sexually active youth and young adults are not using a contraceptive method. During first sex, 22% of teens and 20% of young adults did not use a method.
- Under health care reform (ACA), many preventive sexual health services are now available free of charge.

Social and structural factors can make it challenging for some Americans to achieve good sexual health.

- Sexual health is influenced by a large range of factors, including the conditions in which we are born, live, grow, work and play.
- Some of the circumstances in which people live can make them vulnerable to poor sexual health. These negative factors and inequities can include poverty, lack of education, sexual violence, discrimination, stigma, power inequities, and lack of access to sexual health services.

The individual and societal costs of poor sexual health are significant, and can include physical, emotional and financial consequences.

Physical

STIs: Annually, there are an estimated 20 million new cases of STIs, and a total of 110 million cases overall. That's more than the total number of cases of diabetes, heart disease, breast cancer, and asthma combined. STIs can cause many harmful, often irreversible health conditions, including infertility, male and female cancers and fetal illness.

Unplanned pregnancies: There are an estimated 3.2 million unplanned pregnancies annually, primarily among women in their 20s (1.36 million) and teens (883,000). The U.S. still has one of the highest unplanned pregnancy rates in the developed world.

Sexual functioning: Nearly 50% of sexually active men and women (ages 57-85) report at least one problem relating to sexual functioning.

Sexual violence: More than one-in-three women and one-in-four men have experienced intimate partner violence, including rape, physical violence, or stalking, which can take a tremendous toll.

Emotional: The emotional consequences of poor sexual health can be significant, including depression and anxiety. They can result from a lack of respect, satisfaction, and equity within relationships; lack of self-confidence; sexual violence; and experiencing STIs, unplanned pregnancies, and problems with sexual functioning.

Financial: The annual medical cost of the eight leading STIs is about \$16 billion while unplanned pregnancies cost \$12 billion. Combined, that's double the amount of direct health care costs of childhood obesity.

Americans are eager to improve their sexual health, but face many barriers.

- According to a 2013 NCSH national survey of 268 women and men ages 18-70, the vast majority believe that good sexual health is important.
- About 25% said building positive relationships was the top challenge to achieving good sexual health, while 20% said that choosing partners who treat you well and valuing one's self were top barriers.
- In NCSH focus group discussions, participants also cited a lack of communication about sex and sexual health as a significant barrier to good sexual health.

What is the solution?

Why America needs a positive approach to sexual health that focuses more on the “do’s” than the “don’ts.”

- Traditionally we've often focused on the negative—the threat of disease—while emphasizing “good or bad” behaviors and risk.
- Instead, we should focus on equipping people with information and skills to talk about sexual health, build positive relationships, protect themselves, and access high-quality sexual health services.
- We know that this positive, comprehensive approach works. Typically, this approach includes both abstinence and use of contraception, and addresses sexuality, relationship-building, and self-esteem.
- Three national studies found that comprehensive sex education is more effective in reducing the risk of pregnancy and STIs than abstinence-only programs.
- We have a public health and ethical obligation to provide complete and accurate information that can help individuals protect and improve their health.

Sexual health is a vital part of overall health and well-being throughout our lives.

- Good sexual health can help us enjoy positive relationships and a satisfying sex life, and help us avoid negative outcomes, such as STIs, unplanned pregnancies, and other health conditions.
- Sexuality is a natural and a positive part of life for most people.
- We may think sexual health is less important as we age, but that couldn't be further from the truth.
 - More than half of people ages 57-85 are sexually active, and many should be receiving some of the same sexual health services as younger adults.
 - Additionally, having a positive and active sex life has been associated with good health in middle age and later life.

As a society, we should address structural and social factors that negatively influence sexual health.

- We should work together to eliminate negative factors such as discrimination, stigma, power inequities, lack of access to health care services, sexual violence, and poverty.

We should recognize and create awareness that everyone has the right to enjoy good sexual health.

This includes the right to:

- Attain the highest possible standard of health, including sexual health
- Control and make decisions related to your sexuality and body
- Enjoy equality and be free from discrimination
- Be free from all forms of violence and coercion
- Experience pleasurable, satisfying, and safe sexual experiences
- Complete and accurate information about sexuality and sexual health
- Accessible and affordable sexual health services

It's time to get comfortable talking about sex and sexual health.

- People should feel comfortable talking about sex and sexual health with their partners, health care providers, and families.
- Without open communication, people are less likely to build positive and safe relationships or get recommended preventive sexual health services.
- As long as there is embarrassment and discomfort associated with sex and sexual health, these conversations are unlikely to occur.
- In other countries where sexuality is openly and positively discussed and services are available and affordable, health outcomes are often better.
 - For example, in the Netherlands, teen pregnancy and abortion rates are significantly lower than in the U.S. In the Netherlands, services are more widely available and there is less poverty than in the U.S.
 - In addition, Dutch teens are encouraged to have informed and positive attitudes towards their sexuality, plan for sexual activity, negotiate effectively with partners, and seek health care services.

What are the benefits?

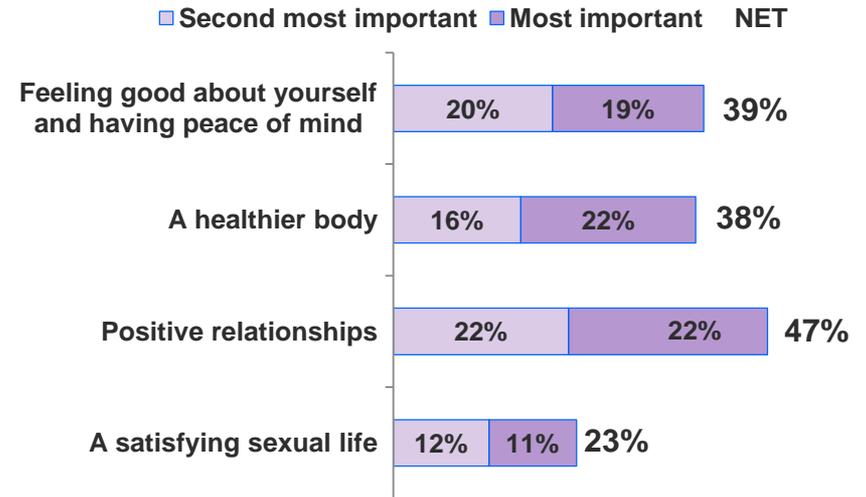
The benefits of good sexual health go well beyond disease prevention.

- Being sexually healthy means being able to enjoy a healthier body, a satisfying sexual life, positive relationships, and peace of mind.
- Good sexual health has physical, emotional, and relationship benefits. It plays a key role in overall health and well-being throughout our lives. Good sexual health can also lead to a healthier community.
- It's up to you to choose if and when you have sex. If you do choose to be sexually active, studies reveal that sexual activity can foster happiness, immunity, longevity, and pain management. Some studies even suggest that sexual activity may reduce the risk of heart disease and cancer.

There are many good reasons to pay attention to your sexual health.

- According to the NCSH survey, Americans view having **positive relationships** as the top benefit of good sexual health. Americans believe it is important to have relationships that are based on open and honest communication, and that are respectful, pleasurable, comfortable, and safe.
- **Feeling good about yourself and having peace of mind** was the second benefit that Americans linked with good sexual health. This includes being in control of your sexual choices; being comfortable with yourself, body and sexual identity; and reducing stress, worry and regrets related to sex and sexual health.
- The third most important benefit of good sexual health was having **a healthier body**. This includes avoiding STIs and HIV, maintaining good sexual functioning, and having pregnancies when they are wanted.
- Another important benefit to good sexual health cited by Americans was enjoying a **more satisfying sex** life based on personal values, desires and boundaries. This includes their choice to be sexually active or not.

Most Important Benefits Of Good Sexual Health Percent “Most Important” and “Second Most Important” National Online Panel



Citation:

National Coalition for Sexual Health. Results of Qualitative and Online Message Testing To Support A Sexual Health Campaign. Washington, DC: July/August 2013.

What is the Call-to-Action?

It's time to give our sexual health the attention it deserves.

- Even though sex may be spontaneous, we need to think about our sexual health, plan ahead when possible, and take action both inside and outside of the bedroom.

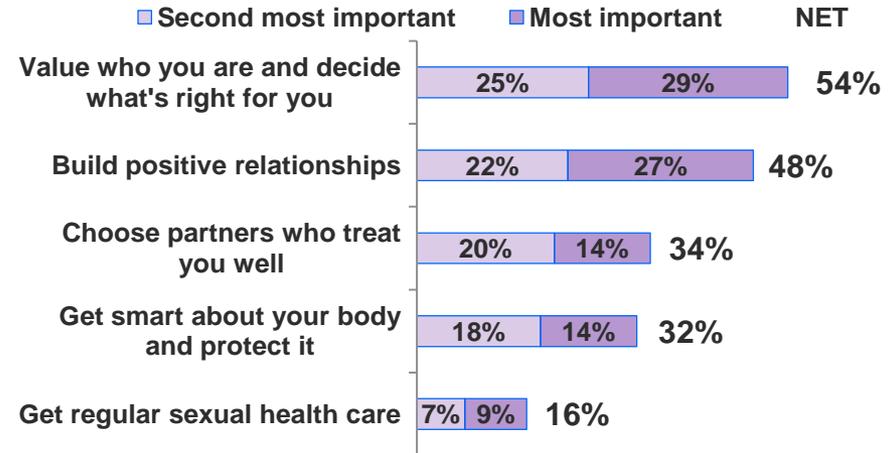
There are specific steps you can take to be sexually healthy.

According to the NCSH survey, Americans agree that five key action steps can help you achieve good sexual health:

- 1. Value who you are and decide what's right for you.** Define your personal values, desires, and boundaries before you get involved with someone. These might change depending on your stage in life. It's up to you to decide if and when you choose to have sex.
- 2. Get smart about your body and protect it.** Learn about your body and how it works. Prevent sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancies by practicing safer sex. Condoms can prevent both STIs and unplanned pregnancies, while other methods only prevent pregnancy. Find out which methods are best for you.
- 3. Treat your partners well and expect them to treat you well.** Be with partners who make you feel good about yourself, comfortable and safe. Be with partners who respect you and your boundaries.
- 4. Build positive relationships** by having open conversations about your relationship, desires, and sexual health. If your partner is violent, pressures, or tries to control you, seek help.
- 5. Make sexual health part of your health care routine.** Find a health care provider who makes you feel comfortable. Have open and honest conversations, and make sure you get the sexual health services you need.
 - Also, check out the new NCSH guide and mobile-friendly website, "Take Charge of your Sexual Health: What You Need to Know about Preventive Services." The guide is available at <http://www.ncshguide.org>.

Most Important Action Steps To Achieve or Maintain Good Sexual Health

Percent "Most Important" and "Second Most Important"
National Online Panel



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