

Comprehensive study finds most teens over 15 have engaged in oral sex

By Laura Sessions Stepp
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WASHINGTON — Slightly more than half of Americans ages 15 to 19 have engaged in oral sex, with females and males reporting similar levels of experience, according to the most comprehensive national survey of sexual behaviors ever released by the federal government.

The report, released yesterday by the National Center for Health Statistics in Hyattsville, Md., shows that the figure increases to about 70 percent of 18- and 19-year-olds.

The survey, according to those who work with young people, offers one more sign that young women are more sexually confident than in the past. A release by the center six months ago, based on the same survey results, showed that slightly more girls than boys have intercourse before they turn 20.

In addition, other national data indicate that the same proportion of high school girls and boys have sex only one time with a particular person or have relationships with others with whom they are not romantically involved.

"This is a point of major social transition," James Wagoner, president of Advocates for Youth, a Washington-based reproductive health organization, said Wednesday. "The data are now coming out and roiling the idea that boys are the hunters and young girls are the prey."

The data also underscore the fact that, unlike their parents' generation, many young people — particularly those from middle- and upper-income white families — simply do not consider oral sex a big deal.

"Oral sex is far less intimate than intercourse. It's a different kind of relationship," said Claire Brindis, professor of pediatrics at the University of California-San Francisco. "At 50 percent, we're talking about a major social norm. It's part of kids' lives."

Bill Albert, communications director for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, put the generational difference this way: "We used to talk about sex in terms of first base,

second base and so on. Oral sex was maybe in the dugout."

Until now, said Brindis, who has worked in the field of adolescent health for 30 years, researchers, policy-makers and

politicians could turn only to anecdotal evidence or small samples to gauge sexual behavior.

Policies and programs were put into place that may turn out to be ineffective and put young

people more at risk for sexually transmitted disease.

The newly released data, gathered in 2002, are sure to stir debate over abstinence-only sex education. Supporters of such

programs say they have resulted in young people delaying intercourse, but opponents say they simply have led young people to substitute other risky behaviors, especially oral sex.