

# Sexual abstinence

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**Sexual abstinence** or **sexual restraint** is the practice of refraining from some or all aspects of sexual activity for medical, psychological, legal, social, financial, philosophical, moral or religious reasons. Asexuality is distinct from sexual abstinence; and celibacy is sexual abstinence generally motivated by factors such as an individual's personal or religious beliefs.<sup>[2]</sup> Sexual abstinence before marriage is required in some societies by social norms, or, in some countries, even by laws, and is considered part of chastity. Some societies have or had a double standard in regard to chastity.

Abstinence may be voluntary (when an individual chooses not to engage in sexual activity due to moral, religious, philosophical, etc. reasons), an involuntary result of social circumstances (when one cannot find any willing sexual partners), or legally mandated (e.g. in countries where sexual activity outside marriage is illegal, in prisons etc.).

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Purity rings are worn by some youth committed to the practice of sexual abstinence.<sup>[1]</sup>

## History

The ancient world discouraged promiscuity for both health and social reasons.<sup>[3]</sup> According to Pythagoras (6th century BCE) sex should be practiced in the winter, but not the summer, but was harmful to male health in every season because the loss of semen was dangerous, hard to control and both physically and spiritually exhausting, but had no effect on females.<sup>[3]</sup> This idea may have been merged with Zoroastrian ideas of good and evil in a philosophy known as gnosticism, which influenced Christian and Islamic attitudes to sexual activity.<sup>[3]</sup> But others stated that the Christian religion hold on to the ideal of sexual abstinence prior to the appearing of gnosticism and Zoroastrianism and its root are to be found in the old testament (which is the base of the new testament) in which virginity was required by law and marriage was especially protected (see Deuteronomy chapter 22).

Throughout history, and especially prior to the 20th century, there have been those who have held that sexual abstinence confers numerous health benefits. For males, lack of abstinence was thought to cause a reduction of vitality. In modern times, the argument has been phrased in biological terms, claiming that loss of semen through ejaculation results in a depletion of vital nutrients such as lecithin and phosphorus, which are also found at high levels in the brain. Conservation of the semen allegedly allows it to be reabsorbed back into the bloodstream and aid in the healthy development of the body. Along these lines, the noted German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche spoke of the positive physiological effects of abstinence: "The reabsorption of semen by the blood ... perhaps prompts the stimulus of power, the unrest of all forces towards the overcoming of resistances ... The feeling of power has so far mounted highest in abstinent priests and hermits" (quoted by Walter Kaufman in his classic, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, p. 222). Before the "sexual revolution" of the 1960s, it was commonly believed by

members of the medical profession that numerous mental and physical diseases in men were caused primarily by loss of nutrients through seminal discharge, and that the deliberate conservation of this substance would lead to increased health, vitality, and intellectual prowess. This also applied to masturbation, which was also thought to lead to bedwetting and hairy palms.

Some advantages in favor of sexual abstinence were also claimed by Walter Siegmeyer, better known as Dr. Raymond W. Bernard A.B., M.A., PhD, an early 20th-century American alternative health, esoteric writer, author and mystic, who formed part of the alternative reality subculture. In his essay entitled *Science discovers the physiological value of continence* (<http://www.ktk.ru/~cm/contin.htm>) (1957) he states:

"[I]t is clear that there is an important internal physiological relation between the secretions of the sex glands and the central nervous system, that the loss of these secretions, voluntarily or involuntarily, exercises a detrimental effect on the nutrition and vitality of the nerves and brain, while, on the other hand, the conservation of these secretions has a vitalizing effect on the nervous system, a regenerating effect on the endocrine glands[,] and a rejuvenating effect on the organism as a whole."

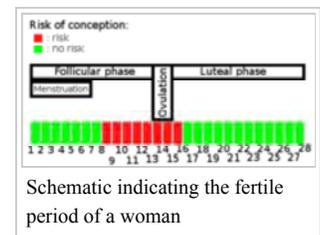
Historically, there has been a swing from the sexually liberal end of the Industrial Revolution to the chaste values of the early Victorian period. This was then followed by a new puritanism from the late Victorian era to the mid-1900s. This important transformation often colors discussion of sexual behavior in the later 20th century. World War I began a return to sexual freedom and indulgence, but more often than not, the appearance of conforming to the earlier moral values of abstinence before marriage was retained. With the conclusion of World War II, the societal importance of abstinence declined swiftly. The advent of the first oral contraceptive pill and widely available antibiotics suppressed many consequences of wide and free sexual behavior, while social morals were also changing. By the 1970s, abandonment of premarital chastity was no longer taboo in the majority of western societies, and the reverse became true. To have experienced a number of sexual partners before marriage became the new norm. Some cultural groups continued to place a value on the moral purity of an abstainer, but abstinence was caught up in a wider reevaluation of moral values.

During the early 20th century, prominent feminist and birth control advocate Margaret Sanger argued that abstinence from sexual activity led to greater endurance and strength, and was a sign of the best of the species:

"Though sex cells are placed in a part of the anatomy for the essential purpose of easily expelling them into the female for the purpose of reproduction, there are other elements in the sexual fluid which are the essence of blood, nerve, brain, and muscle. When redirected in to the building and strengthening of these, we find men or women of the greatest endurance and greatest magnetic power. A girl can waste her creative powers by brooding over a love affair to the extent of exhausting her system, with the results not unlike the effects of masturbation and debauchery."<sup>[4]</sup>

## During fertile period

Sexual abstinence can be practiced during the period in which the woman is fertile.<sup>[5]</sup> This method is often practiced as an inexpensive, albeit uncertain, way of birth control.



## Before marriage

### Premarital chastity

In most cultural, ethical, and religious contexts, sex within marriage is not considered to be contrary to notions of chastity. Some religious systems prohibit sexual activities between a person and anyone other than a spouse of that person, as have, in the past, legal systems and societal norms. In such contexts, sexual abstinence was prescribed for unmarried individuals for the purpose of chastity. *Chastity* has been used as a synonym for sexual abstinence, they are similar but with different behavior and restrictions.

### Legal issues

In some countries any sexual activity outside marriage is illegal. Such laws are mostly tied to religion and the legal and political traditions within the particular jurisdiction. Laws differ greatly from country to country. In some Muslim countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan,<sup>[6]</sup> Afghanistan,<sup>[7][8][9]</sup> Iran,<sup>[9]</sup> Kuwait,<sup>[10]</sup> Maldives,<sup>[11]</sup> Morocco,<sup>[12]</sup> Oman,<sup>[13]</sup> Mauritania,<sup>[14]</sup> United Arab Emirates,<sup>[15][16]</sup> Qatar,<sup>[17]</sup> Sudan,<sup>[18]</sup> Yemen,<sup>[19]</sup> any form of sexual activity outside marriage is illegal.

### Violence

In some parts of the world, men, women, boys or girls suspected of having premarital sex or homosexual sex can become victims of honor killings committed by their families.<sup>[20][21]</sup> Stoning for sexual activity outside marriage is also a punishment in some places.

### Abstinence-only sex education in the United States

Abstinence-only sex education is a form of sex education that teaches abstinence from sex, and often excludes many other types of sexual and reproductive health education, particularly regarding birth control and safe sex. Education programs which focus exclusively on abstinence have hardly been shown to delay sexual activity.<sup>[22]</sup> Such programs promote sexual abstinence until marriage and often condemn the use of contraceptives. Comprehensive sex education, by contrast, covers the use of contraceptives as well as abstinence.

Organizations such as SIECUS have called abstinence-only programs "fear-based," and "designed to control young people's sexual behavior by instilling fear, shame, and guilt."<sup>[23]</sup> Author Judith Levine has argued that there might be a natural tendency of abstinence educators to escalate their messages: "Like advertising, which must continually jack up its seduction just to stay visible as other advertising proliferates, abstinence education had to make sex scarier and scarier and, at the same time, chastity sweeter."<sup>[24]</sup>

In spite of these criticisms, federal government support has made abstinence the de facto focus of sex education in the United States, so that opponents frequently adopt the line that abstinence education is acceptable only if it is combined with other methods, such as instruction in the use of condoms, and easy availability thereof. Most nations of Western Europe use more comprehensive measures, and in sharp contrast to the heated discussion in the U.S., abstinence is hardly discussed as an educational measure.

A U.S. federal government-promoted abstinence-only program was aimed at teens in 1981 in order to discourage premarital sex and unwanted pregnancies. However, recent studies conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, showed ineffectiveness of this program ([http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/Family\\_Support/abstinence.asp](http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/Family_Support/abstinence.asp)). The Responsible Education About Life Act was introduced by Senator Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ) and Representatives Barbara Lee (D-CA) and Christopher Shays (R-CT) to support age-appropriate sexual education. This program is focused to provide teenagers with science-based information on sexual health, so that they can make a sound decision regarding their sex-life.<sup>[25]</sup>

In 2006, the George W. Bush administration expanded abstinence programs from teens to adults, by introducing programs to encourage unmarried adults to remain abstinent until marriage.<sup>[26]</sup> Family-planning advocates and researchers denounced the program as unrealistic, due to the rising age of first-time marriage in the United States.<sup>[27]</sup> In 2009, the Barack Obama administration removed most of the funding from sexual-abstinence education, and instead used the money to fund the Office of Adolescent Health, designed to prevent teenage pregnancy through evidence-based programs.<sup>[28]</sup>

In 2010, University of Pennsylvania researchers released a model study showing that abstinence programs can be effective. The study randomly assigned some middle-school students to an eight-hour abstinence curriculum and others to sex-ed programs that included contraceptives and mixed messages. Penn researchers found that the abstinence-only offering reduced subsequent sexual activity by one-third more than other programs.<sup>[29]</sup>

### Popularity and effectiveness

The advent of AIDS helped build a more favorable view of abstinence. However, a review of 13 U.S. sex-abstinence programs involving over 15,000 people by Oxford University found that they do not stop risky sexual behavior, or help in the prevention of unwanted pregnancy.<sup>[30]</sup> Other studies have found that abstinence-only education does little to affect the "age of sexual initiation; number of sexual partners; and rates of sexual abstinence, condom use, vaginal sex, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs)"<sup>[31]</sup> Recently, the United States Congress also found similar results in a study conducted by Mathematica Policy Research on abstinence.<sup>[32]</sup> Currently, there are also issues as to what abstinence means: is it abstinence from sexual intercourse, or from sexual behavior? Movements such as True Love Waits in America, which ask teenagers to refrain from sex before marriage, are heavily subscribed, but surveys of sexual behavior indicate an increase in the popularity of oral sex.<sup>[33]</sup>

### Effects of abstinence on society

Alfred Kinsey is widely regarded as the first and among the most influential figures in American sexology; his research is cited as having paved the way for a deeper exploration into sexuality among sexologists and the general public, and as having liberated female sexuality.<sup>[34][35]</sup> According to Alfred Kinsey sexual ignorance led to real suffering in society and that sexual liberation, as opposed to sexual abstinence, was the key to both a strong marriage and a happy life. Kinsey believed that abstinence was a sexual dysfunction: "The only kinds of sexual dysfunction are abstinence, celibacy and delayed marriage."<sup>[36]</sup>

J. D. Unwin was a British ethnologist and social anthropologist at Oxford University and Cambridge University. Joseph Unwin wrote several books including *Sex and Culture*, (1934). In *Sex and Culture* Unwin studied 80 primitive tribes and 6 known civilizations through 5,000 years of history and found a positive correlation between the cultural achievement of a people and the amount of sexual restraint which they observed. The author finds that the most culturally successful groups always exhibit lifelong monogamous relationships which include sexual abstinence outside of marriage.<sup>[37]</sup> According to Unwin, after a nation becomes prosperous it becomes increasingly liberal with regard to sexual morality and as a result loses its cohesion, its impetus and its purpose, ultimately having a negative effect on society: "The whole of human history does not contain a single instance of a group becoming civilized unless it has been absolutely monogamous, nor is there any example of a group retaining its culture after it has adopted less rigorous customs."<sup>[38]</sup>

## Long-term abstinence as a lifestyle

Lifelong (or at least long-term) abstinence, often associated with philosophical or religious asceticism, is distinguished from chastity before marriage. Abstinence is often viewed as an act of self-control over the natural desire to have sex. The display of the strength of character allows the abstainer to set an example for those not able to contain their "base urges." At other times, abstinence has been seen as a great social skill practiced by those who refuse to engage with the material and physical world. Some groups that propose sexual abstinence consider it an essential means to reach a particular intellectual or spiritual condition, or that chastity allows one to achieve a required self-control or self-consciousness.<sup>[39]</sup>

Sexual abstinence is required for some religious orders, such as Catholic priests, nuns, monks. Although many individuals abstain from sex for reasons such as religion or morality, some individuals may simply have a dislike of sex (antisexualism), or are simply not interested in it (asexuality). They may view sexual activity as an unnecessary part of human life. As with other lifestyle choices, this attitude toward sexual activity and relationships can vary. Some who choose such a lifestyle still accept sexual activity for reproduction, some engage in romantic relationships, and some engage in masturbation.



Young Buddhist monks in Tibet. Celibacy is required for some religious orders.

## Chastity in religions

Some religions regard chastity as a virtue expected of faithful adherents. This usually includes abstinence from sex for the unmarried, and fidelity to a marriage partner.

In some religions, some groups of people are expected to remain unmarried and to abstain from sex completely. These groups include monks, nuns, and priests in various sects of Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity. Chastity is required of the respective sacerdotal orders. The Shakers, on the other hand, impose chastity in the form of celibacy for all members, even forgoing procreation such as the case with the castration cult.

### Christianity

Many Christians teach that sexual intercourse is meant to take place within the context of marriage, and that sexual abstinence is the norm outside of that. But for married couples, Paul of Tarsus wrote that they should not deprive each other, except for a short time for devotion to prayer.<sup>[40]</sup>

Catholicism defines chastity as the virtue that moderates the sexual appetite.<sup>[41]</sup> Unmarried Catholics express chastity through sexual abstinence. Sexual intercourse within marriage is considered chaste when it retains the twofold significance of union and procreation.<sup>[42]</sup> See also the Evangelical counsels. The Methodist Church teaches that "Although all persons are sexual beings whether or not they are married, sexual relations are only clearly affirmed in the marriage bond."<sup>[43]</sup> The Orthodox Church teaches chastity until marriage. But even then, in accordance with the teaching of the Apostle Paul, periods of abstinence are encouraged among married couples. Traditionally, Orthodox spouses abstain from physical relations on Wednesdays, Fridays, Saturdays the eves of Great Feasts and throughout the four lenten periods (Great Lent, Nativity Fast, Apostles' Fast and Dormition Fast).

However, some Churches, such as the United Church of Christ, a Reformed denomination, are "liberal in their approaches, believing that individuals must decide for themselves how to express their sexual nature."<sup>[44]</sup>

### Judaism

Judaism forbids intercourse outside marriage (which is termed *znut* or promiscuity), but has no ideal of chastity. Within marriage abstinence is also required during and following a woman's menstruation. The husband is not allowed to deprive sex from his wife, even if she is not fertile (known as *mitzvat onah*).

### Islam

Islam forbids intercourse outside of marriage; like Judaism the term is *Zina/Zena*. However, maintaining celibacy as an act of piety is not recognized, while marriage for all who are able is strongly encouraged. Abstinence is practiced during the time of a woman's menstruation. Abstinence from sexual intercourse is also practiced from dawn to dusk during days where fasting is observed. Also in the time of Hajj people are not allowed to have sexual relationships, because their body has to stay pure while performing pilgrimage.

### Hinduism

The Hindu tradition of Brahmacharya places great emphasis on abstinence as a way of harnessing the energy of body and mind towards the goal of spiritual realization. In males, the semen (Vīrya) is considered sacred, and its preservation (except when used for procreation) and conversion into higher life-energy (Ojas) is considered essential for the development of enhanced intellectual and spiritual capacities.

The blending of sexual and spiritual is portrayed in Hindu iconography, as seen in ubiquitous phallic and vaginal iconography in Hindu temples and for instance in the Kharjuraho and Konarak medieval temples, where thousands of couples having sex in endless positions, and with the gods, are carved in deep bas-relief. However, these depictions of sex are not generally understood to be a license for free sexual practices, but are instead meant to celebrate procreation as an integral part of existence in the universe. In actual practice, there is a strong societal taboo against pre-marital sex for both males and females, which still exists today in Hindu cultures.

## Associated practices

Among some groups of people, the wearing of a purity ring is a reminder to oneself and others, that they are practicing sexual abstinence.<sup>[1]</sup>

Historically, some individuals were said to wear a chastity belt, a locking item of clothing designed to prevent sexual intercourse. They were used to protect the wearer from rape or temptation. Some devices have been designed with additional features to prevent masturbation. Chastity belts have been created for males and females, ostensibly for the purpose of chastity.

## Health benefits

Abstinence prevents the spread of sexually transmitted diseases such as pelvic inflammatory disease, HPV and others.<sup>[45]</sup>

Some men who have postorgasmic illness syndrome (POIS) are known to periodically abstain for health reasons. The disorder is known to cause distress with a range of debilitating symptoms after ejaculation for a period of 2 days to a week. A similar disorder is believed to affect women, as one woman has been documented since 2016.<sup>[46]</sup>

## See also

- Abstinence, be faithful, use a condom
- Antisexualism
- Christian side hug
- *Harmful to Minors*, a book by Judith Levine which deals with sexual morality in the United States
- *The Fighting Temptations*, a film which features a storyline that involves sexual morality
- Making sense of abstinence
- Purity Ball
- Religious aspects of marriage
- Refusal skills
- Spiritual marriage
- Virginity
- Virginity pledge

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## Further reading

- Benjamin Brown, 'Kedushah: The Sexual Abstinence of Married Men in Gur, Slonim and Toldos Ahron' ([https://www.academia.edu/4919509/Kedushah\\_The\\_Sexual\\_Abstinence\\_of\\_Married\\_Men\\_in\\_Gur\\_Slonim\\_and\\_Toldos\\_Ahron](https://www.academia.edu/4919509/Kedushah_The_Sexual_Abstinence_of_Married_Men_in_Gur_Slonim_and_Toldos_Ahron))

## External links

- Chastityproject.com (<http://www.chastityproject.com>)
- Chastity.com (<http://www.chastity.com>)
- National Abstinence Clearinghouse (<http://www.abstinence.net>)
- Science discovers the physiological value of continence (<http://www.antisex.info/index.php/articles/27>) by Dr. R. W. Bernard, A.B., M.A., Ph.D.

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