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## Average number of sex partners <sup>[1]</sup>

1) Dear Alice,

What is the average number of sexual partners per year for undergrads?

— Curious

2) Dear Alice,

Do you know how many college students are having sex? Are there any statistics? I was wondering if it is lower than a lot of people would have you believe. I feel like I'm the only one sometimes who is not having sex. Thought maybe I'd see if it was true. Thanks.

### Answer

Dear Curious and Reader #2,

You're not alone in wondering if (or assuming that) everybody's doing "it" (i.e., sex); however, it may surprise you to know that study after study has shown that perceptions of these acts don't accurately represent reported behavior. Additionally, it's not entirely clear what either of you mean by sex, as different people may define different acts as sex. However, about one third of students haven't had a sexual partner in the last year, and even those who have had sexual partners primarily have one. And, even if you're the only college student who isn't having sex (or drinking or smoking), that wouldn't make you abnormal. You'd just be doing what feels comfortable for you. People ultimately make their own choices based on many factors, including privacy, opportunity, cultural and religious beliefs, and trust levels. What are the numbers for those actually engaging in sex versus what other students perceive to be happening? Keep reading!

Look around: in every group of 20 of your peers, roughly seven aren't having sex. As for the 13 that are sexually active, they've had an average of 2.23 partners over the last year. But, remember that averages can be deceiving! What that number most likely means is that some may have only one partner, while others may have two, three, or more partners. The American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment II ([ACHA-NCHA II](#) <sup>[2]</sup>), from which these statistics are drawn, is conducted every year with colleges across the country and

tens of thousands of students included in the analysis, and the numbers for 2017 are consistent with numbers from survey years passed. Based on data collected from this survey, the majority of students have had fewer than two or no sexual partners over the past year.

However, it's wise to be cautious with definitions [3]. Although national statistics on college students' sexual behaviors are available, some studies ask generic questions about sexual activities, such as asking about having a particular kind of sexual partner. People may define "sexual partner" in different ways. For many, especially college students, sex means can describe different activities and behaviors. Some questions to ask yourself as you look at the data in these studies might be: how, exactly, do the studies define sexual partners or sex in general? Does oral sex count? What about hooking up? What exactly is hooking up? Are the respondents assumed to be heterosexual? Or, do the studies differentiate between same and opposite sex encounters?

Some studies also don't disaggregate their data by sexual orientation. Instead, they separate the data out by sex act (such as oral sex, vaginal sex, etc.) and sex assigned at birth, although it's unclear what the sexual orientation is of the people performing those acts. Also, keep in mind that research studies and what you hear on campus may be impacted by the society and culture in which you live. Those being surveyed may feel pressure to over- or under-report how many sexual partners they have and how much sex they're having because of social or cultural pressures and gender stereotypes. Masculine-identifying people may feel like they're expected to be having more sex and have more sexual partners, and feminine-identifying people often feel pressure to be perceived as having less sex. This may affect the numbers seen in surveys and what you may be hearing on campus and from your friends.

Generally speaking, statistics can't tell the whole story about something as personal as sex. You might also think of it this way: Plenty of people are talking about doing it, but there's no way to prove they actually did anything. And, for a host of reasons, far fewer people are talking about *not* doing it. You're not the only college student who isn't having sex. Because sex is so personal, it may be better to spend time focusing on your own interests, desires, and behaviors, rather than those of others. In that vein, it may also be key to consider quality over quantity when it comes to sex and sex partners. For example, do you feel ready to have sex? Are you excited about the prospect of having sex with a potential partner, and have you spoken with them about it? Do you feel respected by and safe with them, and vice versa? Be true to yourself — decide when you want to have sex, the kind of sex you want to have, whether by yourself or with a consenting partner, because you want to, and not because of anybody else's behavior.

Here's to your choices and happiness!

Alice!

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