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Prescriptions for the Heart

Abstinence – Is it always the best policy?

Abstinence. It's a subject you probably discussed in your school health classes or at church youth retreats. It's also a topic that used to be at the forefront of discussions at these and other events, including governmental meetings. This once prominent debate has quietly been pushed to the background in recent years. Do you hear about it regularly on the news? Are your kids talking about it in school? Probably not. That's because abstinence has become a foreign concept in our culture today with premarital sex now being the norm for a growing portion of our society.

Abstinence can be defined as refraining from any sexual activity until a determined time. It's a lifestyle normally promoted by churches and other religious organizations. But it's not just religious groups that advocate abstaining from sex – doctors are recommending abstinence to their patients as a method of avoiding severe health problems.

When it comes to your health, there are many benefits derived from abstaining from sex. These benefits include preventing unwanted sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancies and psychological problems. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Surveillance Report on Sexually Transmitted Diseases in 2010, "STDs remain a major public health challenge in the U.S." The report goes on to say that "there are approximately 19 million new STD infections each year, which cost the U.S. healthcare system $16.4 billion and cost individuals even more in terms of acute and long-term health consequences," (CDC, November 2010).

Diseases such as AIDS, chlamydia and the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) are just a few of the many diseases that can be prevented by practicing abstinence. Did you know that 3.8 million STDs were reported among teenagers in 2008? That averages out to approximately 10,000 teenagers contracting an STD every single day. In addition, sexually active adolescents aged 15-19 years are at a higher risk of acquiring STDs when compared with older adults. According to the CDC, STDs are public health problems that lack easy solutions because they are rooted in human behavior and fundamental societal problems.

Diseases are not the only problems that we can avoid through abstinence. An unplanned pregnancy is the one problem that is 100 percent avoidable. Did you know that 468,988 babies are born to teenage mothers each year? (AMA). According to a scientific study conducted by W. Bradford Wilcox, children born to unmarried mothers are more likely to suffer from poverty and are more likely to drop out of high school and have a teenage pregnancy themselves. Simply put, that means that unplanned pregnancies themselves create a multitude of other societal problems.

Abstinence can also have a lasting effect psychologically. People who wait until they are married before having sex tend to lead happier, more satisfied lives. As a result, depression and divorce are less likely to occur. In his report, Wilcox concluded that abstinence was associated with higher rates of family stability and lower levels of non-marital pregnancy, divorce and single-parenthood. According to the National Health and Social Life Survey, "men who marry as virgins are 37 percent less likely to divorce than other men, and women who marry as virgins are 24 percent less likely to divorce than other women," (Wilcox 7). Wilcox also suggests that there is a direct correlation between having multiple sexual partners at an early age and being unable to be monogamous in marriage later in life. In addition, teenagers who engage in sexual activity at a young age are more likely to suffer from antisocial behaviors such as alcohol or drug addiction or suffer from academic failure.

As a result of the ever-increasing risk of health problems associated with sexual activity, abstinence until marriage is still considered by our doctors to be the safest and healthiest choice for teens and young adults to lead a healthy life.

Nevertheless, a discussion regarding abstinence is not fully complete without examining the arguments from churches and other religious organizations. According to Scripture, we are urged to offer our "bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God…Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world…" (Romans 12:1-2, NIV 1984). There is no question that premarital sex has become an accepted pattern of our world. Nevertheless, Scripture clearly advises us against premarital sex. To help spread the position of abstinence, widely-recognized programs like True Love Waits are encouraging teenagers to make a commitment to sexual abstinence until marriage. They are embracing moral purity by adhering to biblical principles.

According to a survey conducted by the University of Chicago in 1994, "the public image of sex in America bears virtually no relationship to the truth. In real life, the unheralded, seldom discussed world of married sex is actually the one that satisfies people the most." In addition, the study found that married people with only one life-time partner are most likely to report that they are "extremely" satisfied with the amount of physical and emotional pleasure they experience in their sex lives.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul asks, "Is it a good thing to have sexual relations?" (1 Corinthians 7:1, MSG). His response is a firm, "Certainly – but only within a certain context," (1 Corinthians 7:2, MSG). And that certain setting is clarified as being within the framework of a marriage.

Throughout the Bible, most references to sex are discussed in reference to the act that occurs between a married man and woman. In 1 Corinthians 7:9, couples are advised that they should marry if they cannot control themselves, "for it is better to marry than to burn with passion," (NIV 1984). For married couples, sex is a spiritual bond that allows two to become one person. According to Genesis 2:24, "…a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh," (NIV 1984). Sex inside marriage has a purpose, and it is this meaningful bond that God intended for us as married couples, not single people, to experience.

Are you asking questions about the benefits of abstinence? Are you worried about your teenager having sex and developing health problems? Are your friends trying to convince you to give up on your commitment to abstinence? Don't simply ignore your questions and hope for the best. Ask your doctor. Ask your pastor. They have additional information about the benefits of abstinence that can help to answer those nagging questions or doubts.

Choosing to remain abstinent is clearly a very important and very personal decision. Though they may have varied reasons behind their endorsement of abstinence, both your doctor and your church agree that refraining from sexual activity until marriage is a prescription for you to have a better, healthier life.

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