

Reproductive and Sexual Health

Healthy reproductive and sexual practices can play a critical role in enabling people to remain healthy and actively contribute to their community. Planning and having a healthy pregnancy is vital to the health of women, infants, and families and is especially important in preventing teen pregnancy and childbearing, which will help raise educational attainment, increase employment opportunities, and enhance financial stability.²⁶² Access to quality health services and support for safe practices can improve physical and emotional well-being and reduce teen and unintended pregnancies, HIV/AIDS, viral hepatitis, and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs).²⁶³

KEY FACTS

- Infant mortality rates are higher among women of color, adolescents, unmarried mothers, people who smoke, those with lower educational attainment, and those who did not obtain adequate prenatal care.²⁶⁴
- Nearly half of all pregnancies are unintended.²⁶⁵ Risks associated with unintended pregnancy include low birth weight, postpartum depression, and family stress.²⁶⁶
- Black, Hispanic and American Indian/Alaska Native youth experience the highest rates of teen childbearing.²⁶⁷
- The preterm birth rate has risen by more than 20 percent during the past 20 years.²⁶⁸ Preterm infants are more likely to suffer complications at birth (e.g., respiratory distress), die within the first year of life, and have lifelong health challenges (e.g., cerebral palsy, learning disabilities).²⁶⁹
- There are approximately 19 million new cases of STIs in the United States each year—almost half of these in young people ages 15 to 24.²⁷⁰ Rates of gonorrhea are 20 times higher in blacks than whites, and rates of chlamydia are 8 times higher.²⁷¹
- More than one million people in the United States are estimated to be living with HIV infection, and more than 50,000 people become infected each year.²⁷² Men who have sex with men (MSM) account for only about 2 percent of the U.S. population, yet they account for 57 percent of new HIV infections (including MSM who have also injected drugs).²⁷³ Blacks, Latinos, and substance users are also at elevated risk for infection.²⁷⁴ Major contributors to these disparities include poverty and STIs.²⁷⁵
- Binge drinking and illicit drug use are associated with intimate partner violence and risky sexual behaviors, including unprotected sex and multiple sex partners.²⁷⁶ These activities increase the risk of unintended pregnancy and acquiring HIV and other STIs.²⁷⁷
- One in four females and one in 12 males have experienced sexual violence at some time in their lives.²⁷⁸

Recommendations: What can be done?

Improving reproductive and sexual health requires empowering people with the information they need to make healthy, respectful, and responsible choices and increasing effective utilization of health care services.²⁷⁹

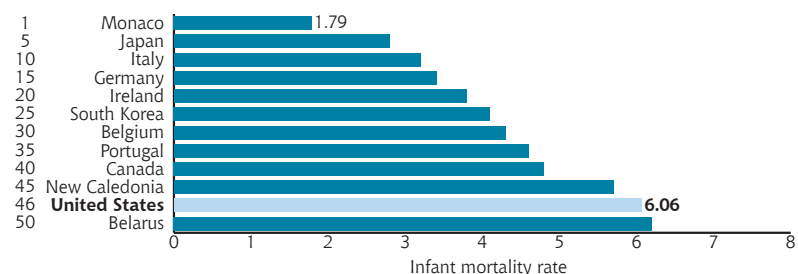
1 Increase use of preconception and prenatal care.

Preconception and prenatal care can reduce birth defects, low birth weight, and other preventable problems.²⁸⁰ Comprehensive preconception and prenatal care includes encouraging women to stop smoking, refrain from using alcohol and other drugs, eat a healthy diet, take folic acid supplements, maintain a healthy weight, control high blood pressure and diabetes, and reduce exposure to workplace and environmental hazards.²⁸¹ In addition, screening and providing services to prevent intimate partner violence and infections (e.g., HIV, STI, and viral hepatitis) help to improve the health of the mother and the baby.²⁸²

2 Support reproductive and sexual health services and support services for pregnant and parenting women.

Reproductive and sexual health care services can help prevent unintended pregnancy, HIV, and other STIs.²⁸³ Supporting access to affordable contraceptive services can reduce unintended pregnancy.²⁸⁴ Health services can also help promote knowledge about, and compliance with, recommended screening and vaccination for specific STIs.²⁸⁵ Providing pregnant and parenting teens and women with supportive services during this time can help ensure positive outcomes for both moms and children, such as graduation rates and parenting skills. These supports can include services needed to help these teens and women complete school, access health care services, child care, and other critical support services. It can also include efforts to combat violence against women.²⁸⁶

The U.S. Infant Mortality Rate is Higher than 45 Other Countries



Source: The World Factbook, Central Intelligence Agency, 2011 Estimates

3 Provide effective sexual health education, especially for adolescents.

Medically accurate, developmentally appropriate, and evidence-based sexual health education provides people with the skills and resources to help make informed and responsible decisions.²⁸⁷ In adolescents, this decision making may delay initiation of sexual behavior; in adults, including seniors, it may encourage safe sex even if pregnancy is no longer a concern.²⁸⁸ Effective sexual health education, mentoring programs, and other evidence-based activities can reduce risks associated with unintended pregnancy or HIV and other STIs and increase communication, decision-making, and healthy relationship skills needed to foster relationships free of sexual violence.²⁸⁹ Parental and caregiver monitoring, support, and effective communication with their children about sexual topics can decrease sexual risk-taking behavior among adolescents.²⁹⁰ Programs that empower parents and caregivers with the knowledge and skills to effectively guide their children about sexual health can effectively prevent sexual risk behavior among youth.²⁹¹

4 Enhance early detection of HIV, viral hepatitis, and other STIs and improve linkage to care. Routine screening can enhance early detection of HIV, viral hepatitis, chlamydia, and other STIs. Linking people to treatment reduces transmission and improves

health²⁹²; for example, people living with HIV who receive antiretroviral therapy are 92 percent less likely to transmit HIV to others.²⁹³ Early identification and treatment of HIV and chronic viral hepatitis infections can halt disease progression and improve the quality and length of life. Many common STIs (e.g., gonorrhea, chlamydia) can generally be cured with a single treatment. Increasing access to and fostering linkages between health care and community systems, especially those that provide low cost services, can improve early detection and treatment.²⁹⁴

Actions

The Federal Government will

- Increase access to comprehensive preconception and prenatal care, especially for low-income and at-risk women.
- Research and disseminate ways to effectively prevent premature birth, birth defects, and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).
- Support states, tribes, and communities to implement evidence-based sexual health education.
- Promote and disseminate national screening recommendations for HIV and other STIs.
- Promote and disseminate best practices and tools to reduce behavioral risk factors (e.g., sexual violence, alcohol and other drug use) that contribute to high rates of HIV/STIs and teen pregnancy.

Key Indicators	Current	10-Year Target
Proportion of children born with low birth weight and very low birth weight	Low birth weight: 8.2%	7.8%
	Very low birth weight: 1.5%	1.4%
Proportion of pregnant females who received early and adequate prenatal care	70.5%	77.6%
Pregnancy rates among adolescent females aged 15 to 19 years	15–17 years: 40.2 pregnancies per 1,000 females	36.2 pregnancies per 1,000 females
	18–19 years: 117.7 pregnancies per 1,000 females	105.9 pregnancies per 1,000 females
Proportion of sexually active persons aged 15 to 44 years who received reproductive health services	Females: 78.9%	Females: 86.7%
	Males: 14.9%	Males: 16.4%
Proportion of people living with HIV who know their serostatus	79.0%	90.0%
Proportion of sexually active females aged 16 to 20 years and 21 to 24 years enrolled in Medicaid and commercial health insurance plans who were screened for genital Chlamydia infections during the measurement year	16–20 years enrolled in Medicaid plans: 52.7%	74.4%
	21–24 years enrolled in Medicaid plans: 59.4%	80.0%
	16–20 years enrolled in commercial health insurance plans: 40.1%	65.9%
	21–24 years enrolled in commercial health insurance plans: 43.5%	78.3%

Reproductive and Sexual Health

- Encourage HIV testing and treatment, align programs to better identify people living with HIV, and link those who test positive to care.
- Research and disseminate effective methods to prevent intimate partner violence and sexual violence.

Partners Can

State, Tribal, Local, and Territorial Governments can

- Increase access to comprehensive preconception and prenatal care, especially for low-income and at-risk women.
- Strengthen delivery of quality reproductive and sexual health services (e.g., family planning, HIV/STI testing).
- Implement evidence-based practices to prevent teen pregnancy and HIV/STIs and ensure that resources are targeted to communities at highest risk.
- Use social marketing, support services and policies to increase the number of people tested and linked to care for HIV, viral hepatitis, and other STIs.

Businesses and Employers can

- Provide health coverage and employee assistance programs that include family planning and reproductive health services.
- Provide time off for pregnant employees to access prenatal care.
- Implement and enforce policies that address sexual harassment.

Health Care Systems, Insurers, and Clinicians can

- Advise patients about factors that affect birth outcomes, such as alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, poor nutrition, stress, lack of prenatal care, and chronic illness or other medical problems.
- Include sexual health risk assessments as a part of routine care, help patients identify ways to reduce risk for unintended pregnancy, HIV and other STIs, and provide recommended testing and treatment for HIV and other STIs to patients and their partners when appropriate.
- Provide vaccination for Hepatitis B virus and Human Papillomavirus, as recommended by the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices.
- Offer counseling and services to patients regarding the range of contraceptive choices either onsite or through referral consistent with Federal, state, and local regulations and laws.
- Implement policies and procedures to ensure culturally competent and confidential reproductive and sexual health services.

Schools, Colleges, and Universities can

- Support medically accurate, developmentally appropriate, and evidence-based sexual health education.
- Support teen parenting programs and assist parents in completing high school, which can promote health for teen parents and children.
- Provide students with confidential, affordable reproductive and sexual health information and services consistent with Federal, state, and local regulations and laws.
- Implement mentoring or skills-based activities that promote healthy relationships and change social norms about teen dating violence.

Home visitation transforms the lives of moms and their babies

Ongoing home visits from trained professionals provide low-income, first-time moms the care and support they need to have a healthy pregnancy, provide responsible and competent care for their children, and become more economically self-sufficient. Evidence based home visitation programs can result in improved prenatal health, reduced childhood injuries, increased intervals between births, increased maternal employment, and improved school readiness.

Community, Non-Profit, and Faith-Based Organizations can

- Support pregnant women obtaining prenatal care in the first trimester (e.g., transportation services, patient navigators).
- Educate communities, clinicians, pregnant women, and families on how to prevent infant mortality (e.g., nutrition, stress reduction, postpartum and newborn care).
- Promote and offer HIV and other STI testing and enhance linkages with reproductive and sexual health services (e.g., counseling, contraception, HIV/STI testing and treatment).
- Provide information and educational tools to both men and women to promote respectful, nonviolent relationships.
- Promote teen pregnancy prevention and positive youth development, support the development of strong communication skills among parents, and provide supervised after-school activities.

Individuals and Families can

- Eat healthfully, take a daily supplement of folic acid, stay active, stop tobacco use and drinking alcohol and see their doctor before and during pregnancy.
- Discuss their sexual health history, getting tested for HIV and other STIs, and birth control options with potential partners.
- Notify their partner if they find out they have HIV or another STI.
- Discuss sexual health concerns with their health care provider.
- Use recommended and effective prevention methods to prevent HIV and other STIs and reduce risk for unintended pregnancy.
- Communicate with children regarding their knowledge, values, and attitudes related to sexual activity, sexuality, and healthy relationships.
- Make efforts to know where their children are, and what they're doing and make sure they are supervised by adults in the after-school hours.

KEY DOCUMENTS

- National HIV/AIDS Strategy for the United States
- CDC's Recommendations to Improve Preconception Health and Health Care
- The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Promote Sexual Health and Responsible Sexual Behavior
- CDC's Recommendations for HIV Testing of Adults, Adolescents, and Pregnant Women in Health-Care Settings
- Combating the Silent Epidemic: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Action Plan for the Prevention, Care and Treatment of Viral Hepatitis

PROJECT HIGHLIGHT: Get Yourself Tested (GYT)

Supported by a cross section of public and private partners, the GYT: Get Yourself Tested campaign seeks to reduce the spread of STIs among young people through information, communication, testing, and treatment as necessary.

