

Teenage pregnancy

In Australia, the number of young women giving birth has fallen over the last few decades. In 2009, the birth rate among young women was 16.7 births per 1,000 women compared to 55.5 births per 1,000 women in 1971. This change is most likely due to improvements in sex education, the availability of contraception and access to abortion, rather than a drop in sexual activity.

Young women who do give birth are more likely to keep the child rather than choose adoption. Changing social attitudes and government support have helped make parenting a more acceptable option for many young women.

Teenage pregnancy in Australia

Research shows that in Australia, over one quarter of all year 10 students and just over half of all year 12 students have had sex. It's often assumed that all teenage pregnancies are unplanned, but this isn't always the case. Some young women plan to get pregnant or choose to not use contraception, despite knowing pregnancy is a possibility.

Five per cent of sexually active students report that they've had sex that resulted in a pregnancy. Pregnancy rates are higher among young women whose lives include the following risk factors:

- Family situations with regular conflict between members
- Violence and sexual abuse during childhood
- Unstable housing arrangements
- Poor school performance and attendance
- Low socioeconomic background
- Family history of pregnancies at a young age
- Low level of maternal education
- Low self-esteem
- Undisclosed same-sex attraction
- Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander status
- Living in rural and remote areas.

Pregnancy options for young women

Deciding what to do when faced with an unplanned pregnancy can be confusing for a young woman. She'll most likely need support from a number of people such as her partner, friends and parents, as well as nursing and medical staff and counsellors.

These support networks can help the young woman choose one of the following options:

- **Parenting** – continue with the pregnancy and then raise the child.
- **Abortion** – end (terminate) the pregnancy. Abortion is a medical or surgical procedure where the foetus or embryo is removed or expelled from the uterus (womb). Abortion laws are different for each Australian state and territory, but early abortion (up to 14 weeks) is accessible Australia wide and later abortion is accessible in most states and territories.
- **Adoption** – continue with the pregnancy and then give the baby to another family who become the legal parents and raise the child. The birth parents voluntarily give up all their legal rights and responsibilities in relation to the child.
- **Foster care** – continue with the pregnancy and then have the child temporarily placed with another family to live while the birth parent or parents work towards resuming care. During this time, the birth parents can have regular contact with the child.

Complications with youth pregnancy

Young women generally experience more complications during pregnancy and childbirth than older women. Reasons for the higher rate of complications include:

- Physical immaturity
- Lack of knowledge about healthcare
- Poor care during the pregnancy or not receiving care until late in the pregnancy
- Poor diet, including not enough folate (which prevents certain birth defects)
- High levels of emotional distress.

Social issues

The social stigma of being a young parent is less common today than in previous years. The availability of government payments and support services for young mothers has helped make parenting a more acceptable option for many young women.

Although many young women find raising a child to be a positive and rewarding experience, the social issues that can be associated with teenage pregnancy include:

- The young woman not being able to complete her education, possibly leading to long-term unemployment or job options that are poorly paid and insecure
- Dependency on welfare or on a poorly paid job, putting young women under more financial pressure, often leading to poor housing arrangements and not being able to afford basic necessities
- A lack of acceptance, support and understanding from the young woman's family members and friends
- Higher risk of maternal mental health issues, such as postnatal depression, among younger women than older women, most likely due to a lack of support, isolation from friends and family members or financial pressures.

Pregnancy choices and counselling

A young woman faced with an unplanned pregnancy can access pregnancy counselling from an independent, trained counsellor who can provide up-to-date information on each pregnancy option and support her in making a free and fully informed decision.

This is especially helpful for a young woman who might not feel comfortable or able to talk with her partner, family members or friends. By accessing non-judgemental, professional counselling, she can receive non-biased, private and confidential support during this time.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Family Planning Victoria Tel. (03) 9257 0100 or freecall 1800 013 952
- Family Planning Victoria's Youth Action Centre (for people aged under 25 years) Tel. (03) 9660 4700 or freecall 1800 013 952
- Community health centre
- Women's health centre.

Things to remember

- Fewer young women are giving birth, most likely due to improvements in sex education, availability of contraception and access to abortion.
- In 2009, the birth rate among teenage women was 16.7 births per 1,000 women.
- Young women are more likely to experience complications during pregnancy and childbirth than older women.
- Young women can access pregnancy counselling from an independent, trained counsellor who can provide up-to-date information on each pregnancy option and support her in making a free and fully-informed decision.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Family Planning Victoria

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