Teenage pregnancy

Summary

- Fewer young women are giving birth, most likely due to improvements in the availability of contraception, access to abortion and improvements in sexuality education.
- In 2011, the birth rate among young women was 15.6 births per 1,000 women.
- Young women are more likely to experience complications during pregnancy and childbirth, compared to mothers in older age groups.
- A young woman who is faced with an unplanned pregnancy and is unsure of what to do can access support from an independent, trained counsellor who can provide up-to-date information on her options to help her make a free and fully-informed decision.

In Australia, the number of teenage women giving birth has fallen over the last 20 years. In 2013, the birth rate among teenage women was 14.6 births per 1,000 women, compared to 55.5 births per 1,000 women in 1971. This change is most likely because of improvements in the availability of effective contraception and in sexuality education, rather than a drop in sexual activity.

These days, teenagers who do give birth are more likely to keep the child rather than choose adoption. For many young women, changing social attitudes and government support have helped make teenage parenting a more acceptable option.

Teenage pregnancy in Australia

Research shows that in Australia, only about one quarter of all year 10 students and just over half of all year 12 students have had sexual intercourse. People often think that teenage pregnancies are unintended or unplanned, but this is not always the case. Some teenagers plan to get pregnant or choose to not use contraception, even though they know they could get pregnant.

Five per cent of sexually active students report that they have had sexual intercourse that resulted in a pregnancy. Pregnancy rates are higher among teenagers whose lives include:

- family situations with regular conflict
- family violence or sexual abuse during childhood
- unstable housing arrangements
- living in out of home care
- 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
- having a mental health diagnosis.

Pregnancy options for teenage women

Deciding what to do when faced with an unintended or unplanned pregnancy can be a confusing and anxious time for a teenager. She will most likely need support from a number of people, such as her boyfriend or partner,
friends and parents, as well as nursing and medical staff, and counsellors.

These support networks can help teenagers choose one of several options, including:

- **parenting** – continue with the pregnancy and then raise the child
- **adoption** – continue with the pregnancy and then give the baby to another family who then become the legal parents of the child and raise the child as their own. The birth parents (the ones who made the baby) give up all their legal rights and responsibilities in relation to that child. It is possible to have ongoing contact with the child
- **foster care** – continue with the pregnancy and then have the child live with and be cared for by another family until the birth parent or parents are able to care for and have the child live with them again. During this time, the birth parents can have regular contact with the child
- **abortion** – end (terminate) the pregnancy. In Australia, abortion involves either taking medication or having a surgical procedure where the pregnancy is removed 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.

**Complications with teenage pregnancy**

Compared with older mothers, teenage mothers are more at risk of having medical complications during pregnancy and childbirth. Reasons for this include:

- a delay in finding out they are pregnant, which can mean that they have little, late or no antenatal (pregnancy) care
- not knowing how to access services for early antenatal information and healthcare
- experiencing premature (early) labour (where the baby is born earlier than 27 weeks), which can lead to long-term medical and physical complications for the baby
- poor eating habits during pregnancy, including not taking folate supplements in the very early stage (to help prevent certain foetal conditions) or not having enough iron, which can cause anaemia
- emotional immaturity, resulting in high levels of emotional distress.

**Social issues for teenage pregnancy**

The social stigma of being a young parent is less common today than in the past. 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 linked to teenage pregnancy include:

- the young woman not being able to finish her education, which can lead to long-term unemployment or job options that are not secure or well paid
- being dependent on welfare or on a job that is not well paid, putting the young woman under more financial pressure, which often leads 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 and friends
- being more at risk than older mothers of maternal mental health issues, such as postnatal depression, possibly due to a lack of support, being isolated from friends and family, or financial pressures.

**Pregnancy choices and counselling**

A young woman who is faced with an unintended or unplanned pregnancy and is not sure of what to do can access support from an independent, trained counsellor, who can provide up-to-date information about her options to help her make a free and fully informed decision.

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

**Where to get help**

betterhealth.vic.gov.au
Things to remember

- Not as many young women are giving birth, most likely because of improvements in the availability of contraception and in sexuality education.
- In 2013, the birth rate among young women was 14.6 births per 1,000 women.
- Young women are more likely than older women to experience complications during pregnancy and childbirth.
- A young woman who is faced with an unintended or unplanned pregnancy and is not sure of what to do can access support from an independent, trained counsellor who can provide up-to-date information on her options to help her make a free and fully-informed decision.