

The Truth About

Virginity Pledges

Teenwire.com May 11 2004

by Elisa Klein

When you think of the word "pledge," what comes to mind? The Pledge of Allegiance? Maybe pledging a college sorority or fraternity? While these may be the first things that come to mind for most teens, for others, taking a pledge has a whole different meaning! We're talking about virginity pledges. From "promise rings" to "covenant cards," some teens are making public commitments to stay virgins until they're married.

quick poll

Have you taken a virginity pledge?

- Yes
 No

shout out!

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Some virginity pledges are actual signed contracts, while other "pledging" takes place at large youth rallies or even at the summer Olympics. Pledges are often developed and sponsored by religious organizations or parent groups. But all pledges have the same goal — to promote virginity until marriage.

Sounds simple, huh? Well, before you think about signing on the dotted line, here are a few things to consider ...

What Exactly Are You Pledging?

Virginity pledges can be a little confusing. One teen asks, "Are you pledging not to have sex, or pledging not to do anything *sexual*? Can you kiss?" Most people define "virginity" as not having had *vaginal intercourse* — but that definition leaves a lot of room for other activities, like oral and *anal sex*. You can't get pregnant from oral or anal sex, but having either without using a latex or *female condom* puts both partners at risk for a number of *sexually transmitted infections*, including *HIV*. People who have oral and anal sex to avoid losing their virginity still open themselves up to the risk of infection — and to the emotional risks of having *vaginal intercourse*.

Then, of course, there's the issue that *lesbian* and *gay* teens face: how can you be abstinent until marriage if you're not legally allowed to *marry*?

Do Pledges Work?

Can pledging really keep teens from having sex? A recent study by Dr. Peter Bearman of Columbia University found that teens who made public pledges not to have sex until marriage had fewer sex partners than those who didn't take the pledge. They also had first intercourse at a later age than the non-pledgers. But here's the bad news — pledgers and non-pledgers had equal rates of sexually transmitted infections. What's more, when the virginity pledgers did have sex, they were less likely to use *condoms*.

Why? Teens who broke their virginity pledges may not have been prepared to practice safer sex. And breaking pledges is pretty common — in fact, Dr. Bearman's study found that 88 percent of pledgers had sex before marriage! "Everyone in my high school participated in the virginity pledge," says a former pledger, "but we all knew that most of us already had sex! We only signed the pledge to please our parents, and to look innocent." And there's also the possibility that some lesbian and gay teens would sign to look straight.

Should You Pledge?

Virginity is a personal choice, and there's nothing wrong with waiting to have vaginal intercourse — or to abstain from *sex play* completely — until you're married. But if you're thinking about pledging, here are some questions you may want to consider:

- *What are you pledging?* Many teens agree that some level of physical involvement is important in an intimate relationship. So find out what the limitations are before you pledge. Is all sex play prohibited? Or only vaginal intercourse?
- *Why are you pledging?* Will signing a pledge help you stick to your personal goals and values? Or, are you just doing it to please someone else? If you don't take the pledge seriously, why bother?
- *How can I best protect myself?* Be real. If you think you may be in a situation where you end up having sex, by all means, protect yourself! Latex and female condoms are the only methods of *birth control* that also reduce the risk of infection. And luckily, they fit easily in a pocket or purse!