

REACHING OUT

Websites to consult relating to sexual health

TYPES OF PROTECTION

bedsider.org

TEST & TREATMENT INFORMATION

plannedparenthood.org

LOCAL HELP

kdhe.ks.gov

★ Teens aged 16+ can consent to procedures in Kansas without parent approval

PROTECTION OPTIONS

Effectiveness of different contraceptives

*According to gynecologist Sarah Baldassaro and the Cleveland Clinic

MOST

IUD

close to 100% effective

BIRTH CONTROL

91% effective

BARRIER

85% effective

LEAST

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT

Teen sexual activity without comprehensive sexual education or support from knowledgeable adults risks pregnancy

*names changed to protect identity

story by LUCIANA MENDY

HER PLANS OF studying economics at the University of Kansas could be gone. Hopes of enjoying the college experience would be laughable. The University of Pennsylvania was her reach school, but now it could be impossible. If junior Olivia West* ended up being pregnant after unprotected sex with her boyfriend, the future she'd been carefully mapping out all of high school would be destroyed in a single night.

Since West wasn't on birth control, her boyfriend had left 10 minutes ago to get Plan B. West's mind raced with these spiraling fears, tears streaming down her face, her sobs echoing in the silent bedroom.

"I just kept repeating to myself, 'I'm not going to college,'" West said. "My future was ruined. I was like, 'No one's gonna accept a girl with a kid in college.'"

Engaging in unprotected sex can increase the likelihood of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections among teens, according to Dr. Sarah Baldassaro, a former SM East parent and gynecologist of 15 years. Accurate information through education, along with support from a trusted adult, is important for helping teens have safe sex.

It had only been West's third time having sex, and ironically, the night before, West and her boyfriend had a conversation about this exact situation. Both agreed that if West were to get pregnant, they would find some way to have an abortion, but it had been an unimaginable scenario.

"I was like, 'Okay, we're on the same page,'" West said. "And then the pregnancy scare happened, and I was like, 'S---, the page is turning, the book is starting.'"

About 31.5% of Kansas high school students have had sex, according to the 2021 High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey by the CDC. The survey also reports that around 10.9% of Kansas high school students didn't use any contraceptive method at their last intercourse. With students having relatively open conversations in school bathrooms, locker rooms or out of school about having unprotected sex after homecoming, protection is being seen as an afterthought.

For the next three weeks, West strategized. Sitting in class, while her peers were likely thinking about their next assignment, West's mind was focused on how she would tell her parents, who she would stay with if she got kicked out and how she would get an abortion. West trusted Plan B, but its 11% inefficiency rate and the fact that she was five days late for her period had her anxiety spiking.

If she got to seven days late, she would take a pregnancy test and tell her mom — an absolute last resort.

Then it happened. She felt it in the middle of class, and West had never been so happy to get her period.

Looking back, West wished she had done more research and educated herself more about the effectiveness of different types of protection and the realities of the risks of unprotected sex.

After her pregnancy scare, West decided not to take any more chances and got a copper intrauterine device, one of the most effective contraceptives, according to Baldassaro. West was relieved, not only because of the eight years of protection the IUD gives, but also because during her appointment, she was able to learn more about safe sex from her gynecologist.

West had never had a conversation with an adult in her life about sex or the necessary protections, and although she did take health class at SM East, she doesn't remember any of the information about intercourse or protection. Her doctor was

able to give her an in-depth explanation of the various risks that come with sex and the protection for those risks.

"When [the gynecologist] was explaining it to me, I was so shocked, because I was like 'What?'" West said. "I was so uneducated, and I didn't realize until that. I should never have had sex, not knowing all of this. I thought I was educated, but I literally didn't know anything."

Baldassaro, although not West's doctor, treats a variety of teen patients concerned about their sexual health and believes that

83% OF TEENS

May avoid talking to their parents about sexual health issues because they are worried about their parents' reaction

gynecologists can always be a confidential resource for teens.

"As a gynecologist, I love it when a teen wants to talk about things," Baldassaro said. "Most of the gynecologists I know try to create a non-judgmental and open environment. There are truly no stupid questions."

Junior Grace Johnson* has been sexually active since eighth grade, and while she and her partner started off using condoms, she no longer uses "typical" forms of protection. Instead, she uses a fertility awareness-based method.

Johnson uses her menstrual cycle as a form of contraception by tracking her ovulation — the most fertile stage in the menstrual cycle, where an ovary releases a mature egg — and avoiding unprotected sex during her fertile window.

"There are other ways to go about [protection], especially if you're more educated on your own body, because your body's going to be different from somebody else's," Johnson said. "If you're a female, and you learn about how your cycle works, like how an egg is processed and fertilized, then that definitely helps educate you on preventing getting pregnant."

According to Baldassaro, when done correctly, fertility awareness-based methods provide relatively the same

amount of protection as a condom but provide no protection against STIs.

After a pregnancy scare as a freshman, Johnson learned about fertility-based awareness through her own research about the female body, and from there she started using female-owned cycle tracking apps like Stardust and Aviva.

But a key part of Johnson's protection is being comfortable enough to have constant communication with her boyfriend about where she is in her cycle and when it's not safe for them to have unprotected sex.

Senior Michael Smith* also made sure to have conversations about protection with his girlfriend before they started having sex, along with what they would do if she accidentally got pregnant. So when Smith's condom broke during sex, the past conversations they had for such a scenario and plans for getting an abortion allowed them to be more prepared despite the chaos of the pregnancy scare.

"I feel like without discussing it earlier, it would have definitely been a lot of heavy emotions thrown around really quick," Smith said. "The topic of abortion and all that kind of stuff is very heavy if it's the first time you're talking about it when emotions are so high, because it's so scary. If we hadn't had conversations beforehand, I feel like it would have been much harder to make smart decisions, like we did."

But even though planning can help lessen the stress when dealing with the risks of sex, Smith's girlfriend was terrified. While Smith worked to keep a level head as he went to get Plan B, he was still trying to comprehend the situation.

"I was like, 'There's no way this can be real.'" Smith said. "Like, 'There's no way she'll get pregnant,' I hear about people and all that kind of stuff happening all the time. But it felt so not real to my situation, and it was just hard to grasp."

Smith felt like he could have probably

THE TALK

Statistics regarding child to parent conversations about sex

*According to a research study by Advocates for Youth

51% OF TEENS

had talked about when they are ready to have sex with their parents

77% OF TEENS

don't know how to bring the subject of sex up

78% OF TEENS

attribute embarrassment as the top reason for not talking about sex

43% OF TEENS

had talked with their parents about how to bring the topic of sex up with their boyfriend or girlfriend

stresses the fact that the only way to be 100% protected is by not having sex at all, but also teaches about different forms of protection and STIs.

The unit is purposefully set at the end of the semester so students are more comfortable discussing the topic with their peers. In the class, while students aren't receiving the classic condom and banana lesson, according to health teacher Maggie Archer, she works to create an environment where students feel comfortable asking questions and learning about the mature topic.

I·U·D

A small plastic T-shaped contraceptive device that a doctor or nurse puts into a female uterus

"I would like to think students take [the curriculum] seriously," Archer said. "I hope they do. Each class's personality is just different. Like, some classes are just always going to be quiet. Other classes, they're going to talk and have so many questions. So it just kind of depends. I just do the best I can and hope that kids get something out of the lesson."

However, West and Smith both forgot the majority of what they learned in health class, since students mainly take the class as freshmen, with the grade making up 80% of the class this semester.

West regrets not paying enough attention during the sexual education unit. Smith believes that teens need to know they should be taking conversations about sex more seriously, and that can happen through more social acceptance of the topic.

"I think we need to address the whole topic of sex more head-on, and not try to hide from it," Smith said. "This should be a topic that is talked about very heavily, so it's not embarrassing. I just think we need the school, and the world in general, needs to be more educated on the topic."

IT SHOULDN'T

be a big deal to talk about protection. It shouldn't be a taboo topic. The more that people talk about it and allow teenagers to know about it, the safer they're going to be.

SARAH BALDASSARO
GYNECOLOGIST

If a student is nervous about discussing concerns about their sexual activity with their parents, SM East social workers are always an available resource for confidential conversations about such topics, according to social worker Emily MacNaughton.

SM East also provides sex education through health class, which follows the state-mandated high school curriculum of Abstinence Plus. This curriculum