

Are You Playing Baby Roulette?

Condoms...sometimes. The Pill...when you remember. Experts say women are being increasingly inconsistent about birth control. But at what cost? Michelle Stacey reports on the new pregnancy ambivalence.



Baby, do you feel lucky?

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VERONICA,* 28, was about three years into a serious relationship when she started getting less careful about taking the Pill. She didn't necessarily *want* a baby, but she felt OK about rolling the pregnancy dice. "If it just 'happened,' it would have worked out," she says. And even though she and her boyfriend recently broke up after five years together, Veronica still thinks if she had gotten pregnant, it would have been meant to be: "You can have a child when you're not 100 percent sure of things. You just work it in."

This laissez-faire attitude about the life-changing act of becoming a mother may seem shocking, but it's far from unusual. Nearly 50 percent of American pregnancies are unplanned, and three quarters of those are in women 29 and younger. And get this: Research shows that women with a college degree are *more* likely to experience an unintended pregnancy than those who haven't attended college.

With plenty of birth control options available, you'd think those numbers would be dropping—but they're not, says Kelleen Kaye, senior director of research for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. In fact, the number of unmarried women who had had sex in the previous three months with no contraception *rose* by 36 percent between 1995 and 2008.

The reasons are startling even to sex-health experts. Turns out many women aren't quite *Continued on next page* ♦♦

STYLIST: BIRTE VON KAMPEN

sure about when and how they want to become a parent, with the upshot that many are simply deciding *not* to decide. "I expected a lot of women would say, 'I don't want to get pregnant,'" says Kaye, who oversaw a survey of 897 women for the campaign's report about unplanned pregnancy, "The Fog Zone." "And I expected that others would say, 'I do want to have a baby.' I *didn't* expect that the same people would say both. There's this push-pull going on."

What concerns public health officials and women's health advocates is that an unintended pregnancy is far from the ideal way to make a healthy baby. Beyond the issues of pounding too much wine or taking dangerous medications before you realize you're expecting, which are serious enough, there is the huge question of how you want to enter into the biggest commitment of your life. With so much at stake—financially, emotionally, professionally—why do so many women have an "if it happens, it happens" attitude? The answers may force you to take a hard look at your own views on when, and whether, you want to become a mother.

There's a New Baby Longing

Perhaps the most striking disconnect in the Fog Zone report was this: While 86 percent of unmarried young women feel that pregnancy should be planned (and 88 percent said it's important that they *not* get pregnant right now), only about half are using birth control consistently. "I'd guess many women are more faithful to their diet than to their birth control," says Kaye.

What's behind the discrepancy? The study found that young women have a strong longing for motherhood: More than half of them said they would like to be a mom right now "if things in their life were different." And even among those who said it was important to avoid pregnancy, 20 percent of women (and 43 percent of men) admitted that they'd be at least a little pleased if they found out they were going to have a baby. While celebs have helped glamorize babies as the ultimate accessory, Kaye thinks a major reason women feel this way is simply that they are waiting longer to begin the whole family thing. "In the past, you got out of school, got married and started having kids, so the *drive* to start a family wasn't an issue," she says. "Now many young adults wait to marry until after they develop

The One-Night-Stand Pregnancy

What is a woman ethically—and legally—required to do or say if she barely knows her baby daddy's last name?

It's a nightmare, but it happens: You had exactly one night with a man—and boom, pregnant. Data suggests that many women who do conceive this way decide to terminate the pregnancy (19 percent of never-married women having an abortion say they had "no relationship" with the father). But if you do so, are you obligated to tell the father? Ethically it may be the right thing to do, but legally it's not required, says Steven Mindel, a certified family law specialist in Los Angeles: "Until a child is born, the woman has the ultimate right—whether to have the child, where to live"—even whether to tell the father she was ever pregnant.

Once the baby is born, though, everything changes. If you want to give up the baby for adoption, the father must consent. And generally, if you want to keep the child, you have the right to sue the father for child support, but *he* also has the right to sue *you* for at least shared custody. "If he lives across the country from



you and wins a custody agreement, you may even have to move to give him access to the child," Mindel says. Which is why he advises anyone in this situation to make two appointments: with a family-law specialist and with a mental-health professional. "A woman often thinks, This is *my* baby. If you give birth, it's going to be *his* baby too."

their career, so that urge to procreate gets put on hold for much longer, but it's still there, whether consciously or not."

And women aren't exactly encouraged to talk about that urge. Alison, a 21-year-old college senior, feels the push-pull between baby-making and a career in her life, even though she hasn't even graduated yet. She doesn't want to get pregnant until after she's established in her career, and yet she takes chances; she and her boyfriend use condoms only sometimes. "When I'm in the moment, it's a matter of being lazy," she confesses. "But there's also a little part of me—maybe a big part—that secretly wants to get pregnant. That would make the decision for me, and I'd deal with it. Sometimes being a stay-at-home mom sounds easier than having to compete out there in a tough job market." But it's hard to

admit those dreams to her crowd of ambitious college classmates. Veronica agrees: "There's a sense that it's not cool to get married and have kids right out of college. But if you just 'get pregnant,' you don't face society's judgment. If anything, it becomes kind of heroic: 'Wow, what a sacrifice. She made the choice to raise her baby!'"

The decision to become a mom "is such a big one that women are afraid to be purposeful about it," says Julia McQuillan, Ph.D., a professor of sociology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, who has researched women's feelings about parenthood. "So it's almost like they're tempting fate." But this kind of deciding by default can backfire, says Mary Nettleman, M.D., chair of the department of medicine at Michigan State University. "By being careless with *Continued on next page* ●►

birth control, women are putting themselves in a situation in which they'll be forced to make some hard choices, like: 'Will I drop out of college? Will I stay with this guy who's maybe not The One? Will I have an abortion?'

We Believe in Happy Endings

One group of young women may be more likely to play baby roulette than others: those in a long-term relationship. "In my research of women 18 to 39," says Dr. Nettleman, "65 percent of them said that one reason they didn't use contraception when they had sex was that their partner would 'be there' for them if they ended up getting pregnant." In some ways, that's understandable. Says Kaye, "There's this expectation that you're with the guy you're going to have children with anyway, so if you start a little earlier, it's not a problem—maybe it will even accelerate the wedding bells." But in most cases, an unplanned pregnancy unravels the relationship rather than solidifying it, Kaye says. Sixty percent of cohabiting couples who have a baby break up within five years; if the pregnancy was unplanned, the odds that you'll part ways roughly doubles. Still, says Dr. Nettleman, "There's this belief among young women that the baby will come and it will love you unconditionally and it will all be OK. But there's more to it than that. Having a child changes your whole life path. Sometimes I just want to say to young women, 'A baby is not a kitten!' It's not that you can't raise a child all by yourself, but it's a tough road to take."

And while it's great that the stigma around being a single mom has lifted, society still sends mixed messages about the challenges of parenthood. "Young women see these famous single moms who have more resources than the average woman, and it looks downright easy," says Kaye. "That can really undermine a woman's consistent use of birth control."

Fertility Isn't Always Clear-Cut

Adding to the confusion about the "right" time to be a mom and the idea that things will just work out is another problem: widespread misinformation about contraception and fertility. The Fog Zone



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report found that 44 percent of women ages 18 to 29 have the misguided belief that "it doesn't matter whether you use birth control or not; when it is your time to get pregnant, it will happen." The report also documented a laundry list of other misconceptions: the false notion that long-term use of hormonal methods like the Pill will very likely lead to cancer; that the IUD is bound to cause infection; and that contraception in general, even the Pill, is highly ineffective (nope, it works 99 percent of the time when used correctly). "That such a large share of young women say birth control doesn't matter is astonishing," says Kaye. "These beliefs reflect a reluctance on the part of young adults to take control of their future. Many would rather live in the moment."

Women seem to be confused about their fertility, too. "There's also a lot of magical thinking, like: 'I couldn't get pregnant because my periods are irregular, or I have fibroids,'" says Sharon Sassler, Ph.D., a social demographer at Cornell University, who has studied attitudes toward family planning. "And there's been so much emphasis on celebrities who are having trouble conceiving that quite a lot of young women think they'll need major help just getting pregnant." The Fog Zone

report showed that 59 percent of women surveyed think they could be infertile, but according to the National Center for Health Statistics, only 8 percent of 15- to 29-year-olds actually are. "There's this angst among young adults: 'What if I wait until I have the perfect relationship and my career is all lined up, but then I can't conceive?'" says Kaye. The accidentally-on-purpose pregnancy is a way of not having to face that fear.

But Baby Roulette Is a Risky Game

What really haunts experts about young women's ambivalence toward getting pregnant? The way it raises the health risks for a woman and her baby. Research shows that mothers-to-be with unintended pregnancies are more likely to smoke, delay prenatal care and report postpartum depression, and are less likely to get enough folic acid (which helps prevent birth defects). This is both because women who have unintended pregnancies are less likely to be paying attention to their health in the early weeks, and because they are less likely to have a support system in place to help them once they *do* realize they're pregnant, says Dr. Nettleman.

The bottom line? When it comes to having a healthy baby, every day absolutely counts: Nettleman's research has shown that the earlier a woman realizes she's pregnant, the healthier she and her baby will be. Recognizing a pregnancy six weeks or more after conception, for instance, is associated with a higher risk of premature birth.

And there's your *own* health and happiness to consider, too. If you're feeling baby-ambivalent, experts suggest you ask yourself the tough questions: How would a baby affect your career goals, your bank account, and your future with your boyfriend? In short, do you want to be a mom right now? If the answer is no, then you can't play baby roulette. "The women's movement was all about giving us choices," says Marjorie Sable, Ph.D., a professor of social work at the University of Missouri, who studies pregnancy intention. "The choice to become a mother—or the decision not to—is equally legitimate." The point is to make a choice, not let chance make the choice for you. ■