Faced with intense pressure to have sex, many girls are refusing to cave. Jane Shin Park reports on why some teens are choosing to take it slow.

Photograph by Joseph Szabo.

Few years ago, Lady Gaga—who regularly sparks controversy with her über-racy songs and music videos—shocked fans when she confessed in an interview that she was going through a period of self-imposed abstinence. “I’m celibate,” the recording artist told London’s Daily Mail newspaper. “It’s not really cool anymore to have sex all the time. It’s cooler to be strong and independent.”

Several other young celebrities in music, sports, and modeling have been open about their decision to put sex on hold, including the Jonas Brothers, Olympian Lolo Jones, football phenom Tim Tebow, and Victoria’s Secret Angel Adriana Lima. “Sex is for after marriage,” Lima said in an interview with GQ. “[Men I’m dating] have to respect that this is my choice. If there’s no respect, that means they don’t want me.” She has since gotten married and had two children.

These glamorous stars’ unapologetic support of abstinence is a far cry from the media’s stereotypical portrayal of virgins as naive, prudish, or even ashamed. Case in point: the character Shoshanna on HBO’s Girls, whose virginity in the show’s first season is depicted as a death sentence in the dating game. In one episode, she awkwardly attempts to excuse her lack of bedroom experience to a guy by blurting out, “I’m, like, the least virgin-y virgin ever!”

While sex is hyped up in television, movies, and music, outspoken stars like Gaga serve as a reminder that when it comes to sharing your body, you should define your standards and stay true to yourself. “The fact that celebrities can open up to the rest of the world about this issue makes me feel more comfortable with my own decision to wait for the right guy,” says seventeen-year-old Marisa*, from New York. Lainey, 23, from Texas, who decided to wait until marriage to have sex, says, “Even though Lady Gaga is known for being provocative, she is showing that you can make your own decisions in a world that tries to make them for you.”

Even with the boost of validation that comes from famous faces declaring their no-sex lifestyles, for many girls, deciding to wait can be a tough commitment to keep. For Marisa, the pressure to start having sex mainly comes from feeling like everyone else is doing it. “I know many of my friends are sexually active, and I would say the majority of my high school is, too,” she admits.

While this is a commonly held belief among teens, it doesn’t necessarily reflect reality. In fact, the overall number of teens having oral sex and intercourse is on the decline, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Another CDC survey found that about 46 percent of female high school students have experienced sexual intercourse at least once, which means the majority of them—about 54 percent—have not. “As humans, we’re interested in the juicy stuff and gossip. So there’s much more talk about having sex than there is doing it,” notes Edith Lawrence, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist at the University of Virginia’s Curry School of Education.
HOLDING OUT

It's not easy to stay cool in steamy situations. But remember: "Only you get to decide when you're ready," says Edith Lawrence, Ph.D.
Statistics aside, peer pressure to have sex is very real for many teens, and it can ramp up even more during prom season. “Sometimes my friends will joke that they are just going to have sex with any boy at prom to get their first time out of the way in order to be more experienced when we meet guys in college—and I’m not sure if it’s actually a joke,” says Marisa. “Movies, TV shows, and even friends make sex seem like such a casual thing. I feel like guys consider me a prude for not wanting anything right now, but I think sex shouldn’t be something you just want to get out of the way.”

Indeed, seeing sexual activity as casual and carefree can be a mistake, warns New York City–based psychologist Jeffrey Gardere, Ph.D. “Whether it’s intercourse or oral sex, it should be an expression of love and not just an effort to keep up with your more experienced friends or wanting to have fun. There’s so much at stake—you could end up with a chronic sexually transmitted disease or pregnant,” he says. Consider this: Nearly half of all new STD cases in the United States each year occur in young people ages 15 to 24, and this same group had the highest reported rates of chlamydia and gonorrhea, according to the CDC. These shocking statistics are precisely why Julie*, a seventeen-year-old from New York, is willing to wait. “I think I’ll benefit from sex more when I’m at an age where I’ll be able to take care of myself if something goes wrong,” she says.

In addition to guarding your health, taking it slow protects your heart, says Lawrence. “When you’re intimate with someone, you should feel comfortable and safe. Too many girls talk about not having a positive first experience with sex because they didn’t feel supported afterward by their partner.” Marisa refuses to let this happen to her, explaining, “I don’t ever want to have sex with a boy just because he wants to. I want my first time to be special.”

For girls who are already in a relationship, choosing to wait doesn’t mean they’re trapped in an all-or-nothing dilemma where being physically close with their partner is completely off-limits. The faulty logic about girls and their sexuality is that “either you have sex and you’re a slut, or you don’t have sex and you’re a total nerd. But there’s a lot more to sexuality than just going straight to oral sex or intercourse,” Lawrence points out.
There are different ways you can be sexual without the risk, like kissing, hugging, and touching.” Gardere agrees that having a balanced view of sexuality is beneficial for those who have made the commitment to wait. “Don’t put yourself in a position of perfection; it makes it that much more difficult to follow through on your goal,” he says. “If you do slip up, though, it’s OK—don’t beat up on yourself. Slipping up one time doesn’t mean you can’t still keep the promise.”

If you’re facing temptation to give in despite feeling unsure about taking that step, try confiding in a close pal. “You can even talk with a friend who’s sexually active, because a true friend supports your decision despite whatever she is doing,” Gardere says. Also, try to connect with other girls who have chosen to wait. Says Whitney, a seventeen-year-old from California, “The majority of my friends are virgins, and we’re all fine with it. It’s nice to know you can be comfortable with yourself and your morals without being judged.”

Adds Julie, “None of my friends thinks the other is uncool for not having sex. Most of us don’t mind waiting because we don’t want anything bad to happen.”

Buddying up is also a great way to hold back on getting physical on prom night. “Making your intentions known to your close friends will force you to have more accountability; you can provide moral support for each other,” says Gardere. If you aren’t ready for sex, be conscious of not putting yourself in a vulnerable position during or after the dance, where you’re more likely to lose your willpower. “Stay away from secluded spots, don’t get deep into foreplay, and avoid drinking, drugs, and anything else that will compromise your impulse control,” he advises. If there’s an older woman in your life you trust and admire—maybe a sibling or an aunt—approach her for advice. “Ask her about her early dating experiences, whether she has any regrets, how she made the decision to start having sex,” suggests Lawrence. “Make use of this wonderful resource in your life and become an informed decider.”

Lastly, when the pressure to have sex is on, remind yourself that you have plenty of time. “There’s no rush. And if your partner’s not respectful of this, then he’s not worth it,” says Lawrence. “Remember that you get to decide when you’re ready.”*Name has been changed.*