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## Run the Numbers

Tuesday, May 16, 2006; Page HE04

U.S. and Western European teens start sexual activity at about the same age--the median age for first intercourse is 16 in Sweden, 17 in Switzerland, Germany and the United States, and 18 in France.

Chief of the Multidisciplinary Unit for Adolescent Health at the University of Lausanne Hospital in Switzerland, Pierre-Andre Michaud says Swiss teens differ from their U.S. counterparts principally in that they are more likely to use contraceptives.

Almost half (47 percent) of all U.S. high school students report having had sexual intercourse, according to a 2003 survey conducted for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; for high school seniors, the figure is 62 percent. In Sweden approximately 80 percent of teens have had sex by age 20, according to Tanja Tydén, professor in the Department of Public Health and Caring Services at Uppsala University in Sweden.

U.S. teens are more likely to have sexual intercourse before age 15 and to become pregnant than teens in England and Wales, France and Sweden, according to a 2000 report from the Guttmacher Institute, a nonprofit group that studies sexual health. The study also found that Western European teens are likelier to be in a committed relationship when they have sex.

U.S. teens also have a higher rate of infection and STDs -- due to lower condom use, according to the report.

The U.S. teen pregnancy rate (84 out of every 1,000 girls age 15 to 19 become pregnant each year) is higher than that of Denmark (23), Finland (21), Germany (16) and Sweden (25),

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found a 2000 report in Family Planning Perspectives. (Differences in birth rates are also striking: Roughly six out of every 1,000 teen girls have babies every year in Switzerland, eight per 1,000 in Sweden, 10 per 1,000 in France, and 28 per 1,000 in England and Wales, according to the report, compared to about 54 per 1,000 in the United States. The U.S. abortion rate (then 29 per 1,000) was higher than that in Sweden (17), France (10), Finland (10) and the Netherlands (4), found the report.

According to the Guttmacher Institute, a third of all U.S. girls become pregnant before they turn 20; 80 percent of them are unmarried.

In the U.S., rates of teen sex, pregnancy, abortion and birth have all declined since 1991, as a result, most experts agree, of a combination of teens' postponing sex and increased contraception. But the rates are still higher than those in virtually all Western European countries.

--Elizabeth Agnvall

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