

The Adverse Effects of Hookups on Youth Starting College or University Life

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The transition into college or university often changes a young adult's social environment at the same time that it increases independence. Students may live away from family, form new peer groups, attend parties, begin dating, and make decisions about alcohol and sexuality with less direct supervision than before. Within this context, "hooking up" generally refers to sexual activity outside an established committed relationship, but the term is imprecise and may describe anything from kissing to intercourse. That ambiguity matters because research findings depend heavily on what behaviors are included. It is therefore inaccurate to treat all hookups as equivalent or to assume that every casual sexual encounter has the same emotional or health consequences.

The strongest evidence suggests that the effects of hookups are conditional rather than uniformly harmful. Wesche, Claxton, and Waterman (2021), in a systematic review of 71 quantitative studies, found that people often evaluated casual sexual experiences more positively than negatively, although some studies identified short-term declines in emotional health. Outcomes differed according to personal attitudes, sexual satisfaction, familiarity with the partner, alcohol use, and the meaning individuals attached to the encounter. For first-year students in particular, the important question is not simply whether casual sexual activity occurs, but whether it occurs in circumstances that support informed choice, clear consent, realistic expectations, and sexual-health protection.

Emotional Consequences Depend on Motivation and Expectations

One reason the emotional effects of hookups are difficult to generalize is that individuals enter them for different reasons. Some students seek pleasure, curiosity, companionship, or sexual exploration. Others may participate because of peer pressure, fear of rejection, loneliness, social conformity, or the hope that a casual encounter will become a committed relationship. These differences can shape what happens afterward. A student who freely chooses a casual encounter that matches personal values and expectations may experience satisfaction or confidence, whereas another who participates mainly to gain approval may feel regret, embarrassment, or emotional discomfort.

The 2021 systematic review by Wesche et al. found that less permissive personal attitudes toward casual sex, lower sexual satisfaction, alcohol use before the encounter, and limited familiarity with the

partner were associated with poorer emotional outcomes. This is important because it moves the discussion away from a simple moral claim that hookups damage self-esteem. Emotional response is influenced by whether the behavior is consistent with the person's own goals and values. Students who repeatedly engage in encounters that leave them distressed may benefit from reconsidering the motivations and circumstances surrounding those decisions, but the behavior itself should not be treated as evidence of psychological dysfunction.

Gender also requires careful interpretation. Older discussions of hookup culture sometimes assumed that women inevitably become emotionally attached while men remain detached. Research does not support such a universal biological distinction. However, gendered social norms can influence outcomes. Women may face a sexual double standard in which the same behavior is judged more harshly when performed by women than by men, while men may experience pressure to appear sexually experienced or emotionally unaffected. These social expectations can create shame, regret, or distorted communication even when the sexual activity itself is consensual. The relevant academic issue is therefore the interaction between individual motivation and social context rather than a fixed emotional response determined by sex.

Consent Becomes More Complicated in the College Social Environment

Consent is the most important ethical distinction between a consensual hookup and sexual misconduct. Anyadike-Danes, Reynolds, Armour, and Lagdon (2024) reviewed research on sexual consent among university students and found substantial inconsistency in how consent has been defined and measured. Across the literature, themes such as incapacitation, force, threats, and lack of wantedness appeared repeatedly, yet relatively few studies used explicit definitions of consent. This inconsistency is significant because students may rely on assumptions, body language, previous sexual contact, or relationship expectations instead of direct communication.

Valid consent must be voluntary and ongoing. Agreement to one sexual activity does not imply agreement to another, and previous sexual contact does not establish consent for future encounters. A student can change their mind after initially agreeing. The college environment can make these principles harder to apply when encounters begin at parties or after alcohol consumption. Marcantonio and Jozkowski (2023) found that college students may feel confident about consenting after drinking, but confidence does not eliminate the effects of alcohol on judgment or capacity. When intoxication becomes severe enough to impair a person's ability to understand or communicate a choice, sexual activity should not continue.

This distinction is particularly important because discussions of hookup risk can easily become victim-blaming. Sexual assault is not an adverse consequence for which a victim becomes responsible by attending a party, drinking alcohol, using a dating app, or agreeing to earlier sexual activity. Responsibility rests with the person who violates consent. Prevention efforts should therefore

emphasize the behavior of potential initiators as well as the vulnerability of potential victims. Students should be taught to seek clear willingness, stop when communication becomes uncertain, and recognize that incapacitation removes the possibility of valid consent.

Sexual-Health Risks Are Preventable but Cannot Be Ignored

Casual sexual activity can increase exposure to sexually transmitted infections when students have multiple partners, do not know a partner's infection status, or use condoms inconsistently. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2024a) emphasizes that many sexually transmitted infections can occur without noticeable symptoms, making testing important for sexually active individuals according to age, anatomy, partners, and sexual practices. Correct condom use reduces the risk of many infections, although it does not completely prevent infections transmitted through skin-to-skin contact, including human papillomavirus and herpes.

Human papillomavirus deserves particular attention because it is common and can contribute to several cancers. CDC guidance recommends routine HPV vaccination in adolescence and catch-up vaccination through age twenty-six for people who were not adequately vaccinated earlier (CDC, 2024b). Vaccination prevents new infections rather than treating existing ones. College health programs should therefore present HPV vaccination, STI testing, condom access, and accurate information as ordinary preventive healthcare rather than as judgments about sexual behavior.

Pregnancy risk is also relevant when vaginal intercourse occurs without effective contraception. A hookup may involve people who have not discussed contraception, pregnancy intentions, or responsibility for emergency contraception. These conversations can be uncomfortable, yet the absence of a committed relationship makes them more rather than less important. Students who choose to be sexually active should understand the difference between pregnancy prevention and STI prevention. Hormonal contraception or an intrauterine device may be highly effective for pregnancy prevention but does not protect against most sexually transmitted infections; condoms may therefore remain useful even when another contraceptive method is being used.

Digital technology has added another dimension to sexual-health and privacy risks. Dating applications can expand the number of potential partners and make intentions easier to communicate, but they can also reduce the amount of information available about a new partner. Students may also exchange intimate photographs or personal information that can later be shared without permission. Respectful sexual behavior therefore extends beyond physical consent to privacy, honesty, and the handling of digital material after an encounter.

Universities Should Focus on Decision-Making Rather Than Shame

Universities have an important role because first-year students are adjusting simultaneously to academic demands, peer culture, alcohol exposure, relationships, and independence. Sexual-health education is most useful when it acknowledges that students make different legitimate choices. Some will prefer abstinence, some committed relationships, and others casual sexual experiences. Programs that assume all students are sexually active can alienate those who are not, while programs based mainly on shame may discourage students from seeking contraception, testing, or support after an unwanted experience.

A more effective approach emphasizes intentional decision-making. Before a sexual encounter, students should be able to ask whether they genuinely want the experience, whether they feel pressured, whether they are sufficiently sober to make a decision, whether boundaries have been discussed, and whether protection is available. These questions are not a guarantee against regret, but they help distinguish autonomous choice from conformity or impulsive behavior. Wesche et al. (2021) concluded that situational and individual characteristics are important predictors of emotional outcomes, which supports interventions aimed at decision-making skills rather than blanket claims that casual sex is harmful.

Campus health services should also be easy to access and confidential. STI screening, HPV vaccination, contraception, sexual-assault advocacy, counseling, and evidence-based sexual education reduce preventable harm. Consent education should be integrated with alcohol education because intoxication can affect communication and risk. At the same time, students who experience distress after a consensual encounter should be able to seek counseling without being told that they caused the problem by participating in hookup culture.

The adverse effects associated with hookups among students are therefore real but not inevitable. Emotional regret, anxiety, sexually transmitted infections, pregnancy, privacy violations, and experiences involving coercion can occur, yet their likelihood is shaped by the conditions surrounding the encounter. The academic evidence does not justify portraying casual sex as automatically destructive to young adults entering college. A more defensible conclusion is that risk increases when sexual decisions are driven by pressure, intoxication, poor communication, incompatible expectations, or lack of protection. Universities can reduce those risks most effectively by supporting consent, informed choice, sexual-health services, and a campus culture in which students can decline or accept sexual activity without coercion or stigma.

References

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