



## Strand 2 | Relationships and Sexuality

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| <b>Learning Outcome 2.9:</b> | Students should be able to understand the components of sexual health, including fertility across the life-cycle, reproductive choices, sexual functioning, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health information and services. |
| <b>Pre-learning:</b>         | This learning outcome builds upon learning in Junior Cycle SPHE and therefore some of the components of sexual health will already be familiar to students. Checking in on students' prior learning will help avoid any unnecessary repetition.   |

### What is the important learning?

Good sexual health means making sure you have the knowledge, skills and ability to make informed sexual choices and to act responsibly to protect your health and the health of others throughout your life. Learning outcome 2.9 includes a range of topics and the expectations for learning are:

- **Fertility across the life-cycle** — in Junior Cycle SPHE students will have learned about the physical changes associated with puberty as well as menstrual and testicular health. In senior cycle, the intention is to extend this learning so that students understand some of the issues related to human fertility and how it peaks and ebbs during the life-span. This includes a basic understanding of menopause and male, age-related fertility decline.
- **Reproductive choices** — in Junior Cycle SPHE students will have learned about the different categories of contraception (See [RSE 2](#) activity 10 and [RSE 3](#) activity 6). Some revision of the knowledge component is needed in senior cycle, with more emphasis put on the factors that impact on consistent and correct use.
- **Sexual functioning** — sexual function refers to how the body reacts at different stages of the sexual response cycle - sexual desire, arousal, plateau and orgasm. In senior cycle, the aim is to promote understanding of the differences in male/female physiology and sexual response as well as an understanding that there is both a physical and psychological/emotional dimension to sexual functioning. Mention of self-pleasure and masturbation as a normal and healthy aspect of sexual development is important too for a number of reasons, including that, an understanding of one's own body and desires is a precursor to being able to share pleasurable sexual experiences in the future.
- **Safer sexual practices** — safer sexual activity is generally understood as consensual sexual contact that does not put a person at increased risk of STIs and unplanned pregnancy (See [RSE 3](#) activities 6, 7, 8). In the context of Senior Cycle SPHE, it is important to review prior learning and extend the discussion to consider other factors that contribute to emotional as well as physical safety (such as being in a trusting relationship, feeling cared for and the ability to give full consent).
- **Possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy** — the options and supports available for dealing with an unplanned pregnancy should be shared with students in a factual and non-judgmental manner. Debating the options is not appropriate as this topic is highly sensitive and students may hold strong personal beliefs and values on this topic. (See [Unplanned pregnancy - My Options HSE.ie](#))
- **Knowing how to access sexual health information and support** — while most young people are not sexually active before leaving school, it is important that they are aware of where they can find appropriate and trust-worthy sexual health information before becoming sexually active. If there is a local sexual health centre, students should be made aware of this and a sexual health professional from the centre might be invited to talk to the class about the services they offer.

**Note:** In teaching this learning outcome it's important to be familiar with legislation relating to consent and sexual health and bring this to the attention of students, as relevant. (See [RSE 2](#) p-32-33)

## Key messages

- In teaching this learning outcome aim to reduce any embarrassment associated with taking care of one's sexual health by reinforcing the idea that a person's sexual health is as important as their physical or mental health and should be taken care of in the same way.
- Experiences of SPHE are often criticized by students for focusing too heavily on the risks of relationships and sex, such as unwanted pregnancy, STIs and sexual violence. While it is important to discuss these issues, the positive and pleasurable aspects of relationships and sexuality need to be kept in focus too. Sexual health education is not just about what needs to be avoided. Research suggests that a healthy, pleasurable sex life can improve mental, emotional, and physical health and wellbeing.
- The legal age to consent to sexual activity is 17 years and research shows that the large majority of young people wait until they are at least 17 years of age to have sex. It's important for students to be reassured that just because the legal age of sexual consent is 17, it does not mean that all young people want to or are ready to have sex at this age. That said, some senior cycle students will be sexually active and in facilitating classroom discussion, it is important that these students do not feel exposed or judged. Equally, students who express a desire to delay, or have little interest in intimate relationships should not feel judged.
- During the teenage years, young people are strongly influenced by what they perceive to be the group norms among their peers. When teaching about sexual health it can be helpful to explore, and perhaps challenge, some social norms and expectations. Surveys suggest that young people often overestimate the prevalence (behaviour) and acceptance (attitudes) of risk-taking behaviours among their peers. Sharing key finding from research regarding the sexual behaviour of young people can be useful in this context. (See SPHE toolkit resources)
- In teaching about sexual health, frame the learning so that it is inclusive of all students, including students who identify as LGBTQ+.
- It is important to reiterate the importance of accessing reliable and trusted sources of sexual health information, such as that provided by the HSE at [www.sexualwellbeing.ie](http://www.sexualwellbeing.ie) and also to affirm their rights as young adults to sexual health information and services.

### Possible follow-on learning outcome from LO 2.9

Their right to access services (LO 3.4) and strategies for self-care (LO 3.1)

Go to the SPHE Toolkit for [classroom resources linked to LO 2.9](#)