

## Age of consent for sexual intercourse

### Young couple kissing



‘Age of consent’ is another way of saying the legal age to have sex. Find out what it means to you - and what happens if you or the person you want to have sex with is under the age of consent.

### When can I legally have sex?

This will depend on what country you live in as laws are different around the world. The most common age of sexual consent is 16.<sup>1</sup>

The legal age for sex in your country may be different depending on whether you are a boy or a girl. It could also vary if you are gay or lesbian - in many countries gay and lesbian sex is illegal.

Here are a few examples of the heterosexual age of consent in different countries:

- In some parts of the United States and Egypt - age 18
- UK and Namibia (and many other countries) - age 16
- Sweden - age 15
- Canada - age 14
- Korea - age 13
- Mexico - age 12.<sup>2</sup>

### What does the age of consent mean to me?

Essentially it means that if you have sex with someone when you or they are under the age of consent, then you are breaking the law - even if you both have sex willingly. In the eyes of the law people are unable to give informed consent to sex when they are still considered a child.

This may seem unfair, but try to remember that the law is there to protect you. There’s no set age to be [ready for sex](#) so the law has to generalise.

It’s important to know the age of consent where you live and how it applies to you. Being aware of

global variations is also a good idea to avoid breaking the law in other countries.

Also remember that 'sex' means different things in different countries. Some places count things like kissing as sexual contact while other places only count sexual intercourse. You can find out the laws in your country on your government's website.

## What does 'sexual offences' actually mean?

Age of consent laws are there to protect young people from being sexually exploited by adults, and the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) says that you have the right to be protected from all forms of sexual abuse and exploitation.

So, if the law discovers an adult in a sexual [relationship](#) with someone under the age of consent, the adult will be charged with a sexual offence such as:

- Statutory rape

The crime for those who have sex with a person under the age of consent, but who is past the age of puberty. Unlike "forcible rape" statutory rape can involve underage participants who willingly agree to have sex.<sup>3</sup>

- Child sexual abuse

The term for an adult using their age or authority over a young prepubescent person to have any type of sexual contact.

If you are involved in an abusive relationship it is important to talk to someone. If you're finding it hard to talk to someone you know, try to find a telephone helpline or contact a healthcare professional to get the support you need.

## But I want to have sex now

In many countries, the law isn't intended to be used to punish consensual teenage sexual behaviour, but this doesn't mean it's ok to have consensual underage sex.

Being too young to legally have sex doesn't mean that you can't get clued up about it or start exploring your sexual feelings either. You can still find out about sex by exploring your own body and what works for you.

Learning how to protect yourself from unwanted pregnancy and [sexually transmitted infections \(STIs\)](#) including [HIV](#), will also help you become more confident when the time is right to have sex.

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- 1. UNICEF CRC 'Are you old enough...to have sex?' [accessed May 2015]
- 2. UNICEF CRC 'Are you old enough...to have sex?' [accessed May 2015]
- 3. Find Law (2013) 'Statutory Rape'

### Sources:

British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) 'Age of consent' [accessed May 2015]

Family Planning Association (FPA) (2015) 'The law on sex factsheet'

UNICEF CRC 'What is the Convention on the Rights of the Child?' [accessed May 2015]

**Last full review:** 01 May 2015

**Last updated:** 1 April 2016