

The Condom Conundrum: Young People and STIs

The choreography of condom use: how, not just if, young people use condoms

The UK is facing a sexual health crisis and young people are most likely to be affected. Diagnoses of sexually transmitted infections are increasing rapidly and rates of teenage pregnancy are still the highest in Western Europe. Promoting condom use among young people is an important mechanism for tackling these problems. Yet despite growing rates of condom use among young people, rates of sexually transmitted infection continue to rise. This Big Lottery funded research study, conducted by the Centre for Sexual Health Research at the University of Southampton on behalf of Brook, therefore set out to explore how, not just if, young people use condoms. The research found that:

- Although the majority of young people who had ever had vaginal sex reported using a condom at least once, two thirds reported using condoms inconsistently.
- Young people were more likely to have used a condom the last time they had vaginal sex if they had already discussed and agreed it with their partner, if they had used a condom with their partner previously, and if sexually active friends were thought to use condoms.
- Although young people are at risk of both STIs and pregnancy it is their concern to avoid pregnancy which appears to drive both condom use and the quality of condom use.
- Six percent of participants reported application of a condom after initial penetration during their most recent experience of vaginal sex whilst six percent continued penetration after condom removal: practices which left them at risk of STI transmission.
- Whilst young people were concerned about STIs in general, many did not consider themselves at personal risk.
- Where participants knew someone who had been diagnosed with an STI this tended to encourage them to get tested but did not appear to motivate them to use condoms to protect themselves in future.
- Whilst oral sex was found to be common, the study indicated that young people rarely took steps to protect themselves from STI transmission via this route. Oral sex often occurred earlier than first vaginal sex and was generally perceived as less serious, intimate and risky.
- The chances of reporting a condom breakage or slippage were found to be higher; among younger users, if there was a lack of confidence in the ability to use a condom properly, if they didn't really want to use a condom and following substantial alcohol consumption.
- School was perceived to be the most important source of information on STIs.

Background

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are a major public health problem in the UK. STI rates have risen steeply since the mid-1990s with those for acute bacterial STIs, such as gonorrhoea and chlamydia, more than doubling since 1995. Among young people the rise has been particularly large. The UK also has the highest number of teenage pregnancies in Western Europe. Every year around 95,000 women below the age of 20 years become pregnant in England and Wales.

Increasing young people's use of condoms is an important mechanism for reducing teenage pregnancy rates and the prevalence of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. To be effective a condom must be put on prior to any intimate skin contact and should remain intact and in place throughout the duration of a sexual act. To promote effective condom use, we need to understand not only inconsistent, but also incorrect, condom use practices during *all* potentially risky sexual acts (i.e. condom use during oral, vaginal and anal sex, with or without ejaculation). Evidence from the USA and Australia suggests that whilst relatively high numbers of young people may report using condoms, the quality and consistency of that use merits further investigation.

Key findings

Condom use

- Although the majority of young people who had ever had vaginal sex reported using a condom at least once, two thirds reported using condoms inconsistently. Overall, condoms were most likely to be used by those having sex for the first time with a partner who they were going out with. Failure to use any contraception at all was most common amongst those who had had vaginal sex with someone they had only just met or someone they knew but had not had sex with before and were not dating.
- Young people were more likely to have used a condom the last time they had vaginal sex if condom use had previously been discussed and agreed on, if they had used a condom with their partner previously, and if sexually active friends were thought to use condoms. They were less likely to have used a condom with a regular partner, if they felt condoms are difficult to use consistently with a well known partner, or if they did not have a definite desire to use a condom.
- Young people tended to use condoms primarily as a form of contraception rather than protection against STIs. As a result the way in which condoms were sometimes used, for example where they were applied after initial sexual contact or removed prior to continuing penetration, made them less effective in reducing risk of STI transmission:

Once you sort of perhaps take that step of perhaps not using [a condom] for a couple of minutes or whatever, it becomes harder and harder sort of not to. (Female, 17 years.)

- Six percent of young people who reported using a condom the last time they had vaginal sex, reported applying the condom after some penetration and six percent reported continuing penetration after the condom was removed.
- The chances of condom breakage or slippage were found to increase if there was a lack of confidence in the ability to use a condom properly, among younger users, if there was a lack of desire to use a condom and following substantial alcohol consumption.

Perceptions of risk

- Whilst young people were concerned about STIs in general, many did not consider themselves at personal risk, especially if their sexual partner was known to them. Concerns and perceived risk regarding STIs also lessen as a sexual relationship progresses:

...when you know someone for quite a while, and you know you get on with them and stuff, you just think, 'Oh no, they'll be alright, they won't have any diseases...' (Female, 20 years.)

I have a single partner so... And my single partner doesn't have any diseases. And I trust that she doesn't have any partners. (Male, 19 years.)

- Where participants knew someone who had been diagnosed with an STI this tended to encourage them to get tested. Of those who had ever had vaginal sex, only nine percent of those who had not personally known anyone with an STI had been tested themselves, compared with 23 percent of those who had personally known someone. However knowing someone who had had an STI did not appear to motivate them to use condoms to protect themselves in future.

A friend of mine said she had chlamydia and she said that, because I didn't realise how common it is, and she said...she didn't know how she'd caught it....so I was really terrified after that so I went check and found out that I had it, but I'd only slept with one person. (Female, 20 years.)

- Oral sex was found to be common. It often occurred earlier than first vaginal sex and was generally perceived as less serious, intimate and risky. Although unprotected oral sex is much lower risk than unprotected vaginal or anal intercourse, some STIs can still be passed on via this route. The study found that condom use was rare for fellatio and indicated that use of dental dams for cunnilingus was even more so.

Sources of information

- School was perceived to be the most important source of information on STIs, whilst friends were seen as the most important source of information on sex and relationships. Although young people's knowledge of sexual health and contraception was generally good, the following significant gaps in knowledge were identified:

52% thought that chlamydia affects only women

31% thought that STIs can be caught from a toilet seat

54% did not know that emergency contraception can be taken up to 72 hours after unprotected vaginal intercourse.

25% did not know that STIs can be transmitted via oral sex

- There were also significant variations in the level of sexual health knowledge between different ethnic groups and study sites and women were significantly more knowledgeable than men around sexual health, regardless of sexual experience.

Conclusions and recommendations

The findings from this study raise a number of issues that have implications for sexual health policies and programmes:

- Correct and consistent condom use for all risky sexual acts

is an effective barrier to the transmission of STIs. Given the major public health problem which STIs currently represent for young people, the promotion of effective condom use among this age group is essential.

- Young people's sexual health policies and programmes need to emphasise the importance of condoms for STI prevention as well as contraception and should help them develop the motivation and skills to use condoms consistently and correctly.
- The factors found to be associated with condom breakage and slippage in this study, namely alcohol consumption, lack of definite desire to use a condom, lack of confidence in ability to use a condom properly and age point to the importance of:
 - Ensuring young people have the opportunity to participate in condom demonstrations and are encouraged to familiarise themselves with condoms before they have first penetrative intercourse.
 - Warning young people that condom breakage and slippage are more likely to occur when they have been drinking and alerting them to the extra care needed when applying and removing condoms in such circumstances.
 - Informing young people of the necessary precautions to take (i.e. emergency contraception and STI testing) in the event of a condom breaking or slipping off.
- Communication with a partner about condom use prior to a sexual event was found to increase the likelihood that a condom would be used. Strategies to increase condom use by equipping young people with the skills and confidence to discuss the matter are likely to be beneficial. This flags up the need for school based sex and relationships education to include areas such as negotiation, assertiveness and relationship skills. Youth services, parents and the media could also make an important contribution in this regard.
- The limited knowledge and practice of safe oral sex demonstrated by study participants, the high prevalence of oral sex and the fact that it was often not perceived as 'proper sex' and was experienced at an early age point to the need to ensure that safe sex messages incorporate oral sex and begin early. Just as with other higher risk sexual practices, issues relating to self worth, pressure, communication and negotiation need to be explored with young people in relation to oral sex.
- The young people in this study considered school to be the most important source of information on sex relationships and contraception. However the significant differences in knowledge of sexual health associated with ethnicity and study site indicate the need to ensure that comprehensive, good quality sex and relationships education is available for all students in all schools. The fact that women were significantly more knowledgeable than young men around sexual health points to the need to ensure that sex and relationships education and health promotion campaigns are relevant to young men's needs.

• Condom use was found to be strongly associated with the belief that friends use condoms. In addition friends were seen as an important source of information in particular on sex and relationships. These findings point to peer education projects as a possible way forward in presenting condom use as a normal part of life for sexually active young people. This was supported by young people consulted about the implications of the research who all reacted positively to the idea of learning from other young people's experiences.

• Overall whilst the majority of sexually active young people report having used condoms, this study raises significant issues around the consistency and quality of condom use by this age group. It points to the need to promote condom use more vigorously as a mechanism for STI prevention and ensure that young people are equipped to use condoms effectively.

The study

This study used a variety of methods to explore young people's sexual behaviour and the factors that influence if and how they use condoms.

Firstly, focus group discussions were conducted with young people in order to inform the design of the study and research tools. Secondly a self-completion questionnaire was distributed to 1373 young people aged 16-21 years in 21 schools and colleges in four selected sites in England. This was followed by a sexual encounter diary questionnaire completed by 108 sexually active young people over a period of up to six months. In total 714 diary questionnaires were completed. Finally, thirty interviews were conducted with young people to explore in greater depth issues that had arisen from previous stages of the research.

Further information

The full report of this research study is available on the Centre for Sexual Health Research website at www.socstats.soton.ac.uk/cshr

Further copies of this executive summary can be obtained by contacting the Centre for Sexual Health Research at cshr@socsci.soton.ac.uk or Brook on admin@brookcentres.org.uk

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