

Teenagers - sexual knowledge

Young people have good knowledge of HIV/AIDS, but know less about chlamydia and other STIs, which pose more of a risk for this group. They get most of their knowledge from school programs and from discussions with their mothers.

While there's no direct relationship between knowledge and behaviour – a person may know that cigarettes are harmful, but choose to smoke anyway – evaluations of school programs show that young people who have had sex education are more likely to delay sexual intercourse and to have it safely when the time comes.

The bulk of the information in this article was taken from *Secondary Students and Sexual Health*, containing the results of the *4th National Survey of Australian Secondary Students, HIV/ AIDS and Sexual Health* conducted in 2008 by The Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, and funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing.

Information sources

For information about sexual health, students most commonly consulted their:

- Mother (56 per cent)
- A female friend (55 per cent)
- Used the school sexual health program (49 per cent)
- Pamphlets (44 per cent).

Doctors (39 per cent) were also nominated as a fairly common source of information for sexual health, but their use as an information source did not match the level of trust that teenagers placed in them (73 per cent – the most trusted of any source).

Conversely, students were more likely to use both web sites (36 per cent) and the media (35 per cent) for information on sexual health, than they were to actually trust the material provided by these sources (web sites – 25 per cent, media – 22 per cent).

Key findings

The results from the 2008 national survey included that:

- HIV knowledge remains relatively high and comparable to the levels found in 2002.
- There has been a marked improvement in student sexually transmissible infection (STI) knowledge between the 2002 and 2008 studies. Despite this, in some areas, student STI knowledge remains relatively poor.
- Despite generally poor student knowledge of chlamydia, knowledge of this infection had improved significantly since 2002.
- Hepatitis A, B and C knowledge remains relatively poor, but there had been some improvement in student knowledge regarding hepatitis B and C.
- Human papillomavirus (HPV) knowledge was measured for the first time in 2008 and student knowledge of this sexually transmissible infection was very poor. In most cases, more than half the sample reported being unsure of correct answers to HPV knowledge questions.
- Cervical cancer knowledge was measured for the first time in the 2008 study and knowledge was generally poor.
- There were no gender differences in students' HIV knowledge. However, young women demonstrated better knowledge generally, in terms of STIs, HPV, cervical cancer and hepatitis, compared with young men.

The greatest improvement in students' knowledge related to knowing that a person with an STI frequently shows no noticeable symptoms. The poorest knowledge was in relation to chlamydia, genital warts and gonorrhoea. While knowledge about particular STIs is not always a necessary part of the prevention of STIs, it would still be comforting to see that more students knew more about chlamydia, one of the most prevalent STIs among young people.

Fewer students were aware that condoms do not offer complete protection from all STIs (76 per cent), that cold sores and genital herpes can be caused by the same virus (60 per cent), that chlamydia can lead to sterility amongst women (55 per cent), that oral sex can transmit gonorrhoea (55 per cent) and that genital warts are spread by skin-to-skin contact, not simply through having intercourse (54 per cent).

A minority of students were aware that chlamydia affects both men and women (47 per cent) and that once a person has genital herpes, they will always have the virus (47 per cent).

Understandably, knowledge of hepatitis was relatively poor. However, it has improved since 2002. Students in 2008 were more aware that hepatitis C could be transmitted through tattooing and body piercing (57 per cent), that it was possible to be vaccinated against hepatitis B (72 per cent) and that the virus could be transmitted sexually (59 per cent).

The most confusion concerned the coverage provided by hepatitis vaccinations – there is **no** vaccination for hepatitis C, even though there is vaccination for hepatitis A and hepatitis B. As hepatitis C is blood-borne and cannot be cured, this is an important gap in their knowledge.

Marriage and parenthood

The Australian Temperament Project (ATP) is a study tracking individual development from infancy to adulthood. This study includes the views and hopes of Australian young people aged 17 to 18 years on marriage and parenthood. Selected statistics include:

- 55 per cent of young people hope to be married within the next six to 10 years.
- 18 per cent of young people haven't yet given parenthood a thought.
- About one third hope to become a parent within the next six to 10 (or more) years.
- About 5 per cent wish to remain childless.
- Young men show a general desire to marry and have children at a later age than young women.
- Most young people don't want to have a child within the next five years. Of those that do, more young people from rural and regional areas want to start a family soon (five per cent and seven per cent) than do young people from the city (one per cent).
- Generally, young people from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to want parenthood later (in 11 years or more), while those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to want parenthood sooner (within the next six to 10 years).
- 94 per cent of young people want to have two or more children.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Kids Helpline Tel. 1800 551 800
- Parent Line Tel. 132 289
- Family Planning Victoria Tel. 1800 013 952 or (03) 9257 0100
- Melbourne Sexual Health Centre Tel. (03) 9341 6200 or 1800 032 017 or TTY (for the hearing impaired) (03) 9347 8619

Things to remember

- Most Australian young people don't practise safe sex.
- Australian teenagers aren't very well informed about sexually transmissible infections (STIs) other than HIV/AIDS.
- Most Australian teenagers are not prejudiced towards gay men and lesbians.

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