

Teenagers: sexual health and behaviour

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This factsheet aims to provide key data about the sexual health and behaviour of teenagers throughout the United Kingdom (UK). Where possible, data is presented separately for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Please note that this data is not always directly comparable due to differences in methods of data collection and analysis between countries.

Where Great Britain is referred to, this covers England, Wales and Scotland.

Age of consent

- In **England, Wales and Northern Ireland**, the age of consent to any form of sexual activity is 16 for both men and women, whether they are heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual^{1, 2}.
- In **Scotland**, the age of heterosexual consent for women and for sex between men is 16³.
- In **Scotland**, there are no specific laws covering sex between women, so provided both women consent and are 16 or over, this is legal.

Sexual behaviour

The second National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal 2000), which included over 11,000 men and women aged 16–44 in **Great Britain**⁴, found that:

- the average (median) age at first heterosexual intercourse was 16 for both men and women
- nearly a third of men and a quarter of women aged 16–19 had heterosexual intercourse before they were 16
- about 80 per cent of young people aged 16–24 said that they had used a condom when they first had sex
- less than one in ten had used no contraception at all when they first had sex

- one in five young men and nearly half of young women aged 16–24 said they wished they had waited longer to start having sex. They were twice as likely to say this if they had been under 15 when they first had sex
- both young men and women aged 16–24 had had an average of three heterosexual partners in their lifetime⁴
- about 1 per cent (0.9 per cent men, 1.6 per cent women) of 16–24-year-olds had had one or more new same sex partners in the previous year⁵.

Natsal 2000 did not include **Northern Ireland**. A separate survey carried out in 2000 by fpa in Northern Ireland and the University of Ulster included over 1,000 young people aged 14–25⁶. It found that:

- the average (median) age at first heterosexual intercourse was 15.6 years (14.9 for men and 15.9 for women)
- just over a third had experienced sexual intercourse before 17 (the legal age of consent in Northern Ireland) and a quarter had sex before 16
- nearly two-thirds (63.8 per cent) had used a condom when they first had sex, either alone or with another method of contraception
- about a quarter had used no contraception at all when they first had sex
- just under a third (31.6 per cent) said they felt they had sex too early, and this was more likely (43 per cent) if they had been under 16 at the time
- on average, the sexually active 14–25-year-olds had had six sexual partners; the average for young women was five, and young men eight.

The sixth annual Gay Men's Sex Survey in 2002⁷ included over 16,000 gay and other homosexually active men in the **UK** aged between 14–83.

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- The average age at which men first had any sexual experience with another man was 17.5 years.
- Of those who had engaged in anal intercourse (AI), the average age for first doing so was 20.6 years and 60 per cent had used a condom.
- The first AI partner was, on average, about four years older.
- Men under 20 were significantly more likely to have had both male and female partners (11.3 per cent) than men in other age groups (6.4 per cent–7.9 per cent). In a separate survey of lesbian and bisexual women⁸, the under-20s were more likely to have had sex with both men and women (24 per cent).

The Gay Men's Sex Survey in 2006 found that 25 per cent of men aged 14–19 had had one male sexual partner in the last year, 41 per cent had had two to four, and 34 per cent had had five or more⁹.

Use of contraception

An Office for National Statistics (ONS) survey¹⁰ of women aged 16–49 in **Great Britain** found that among 16–19 year olds in 2007–08:

- 56 per cent said they used contraception
- among these, almost equal numbers said they used the pill or condoms (some will use both)
- 86 per cent had heard of emergency hormonal contraception (EHC)
- 7 per cent had used EHC and 1 per cent the emergency IUD at least once in the previous 12 months.

There is no equivalent survey data on contraceptive usage by teenagers in **Northern Ireland**. The following statistics relate only to women attending community family planning clinics in 2003–04¹¹.

- 49 per cent of women aged 16–19 were using the pill and 21 per cent the condom as their main method of contraception.
- Although women under 20 accounted for 31 per cent of all EC provided through family planning clinics in Northern Ireland, only 4 per cent of the overall total was those aged under 16.

Use of contraceptive clinic services

- 78,000 women aged under 16 attended family planning clinics in **England** in 2006–07. This represented 8.3 per cent of the resident population, a slight decrease from 2006–07¹².
- 255,000 or 19.6 per cent of the resident female population in **England** aged 16–19 years of age visited a family planning clinic in 2007–08, a slight decrease from 2006–07¹².

Teenage pregnancy

- The UK has the highest teenage birth and abortion rates in Western Europe¹³.

England¹⁴

In 2006, there were:

- 39,003 under-18 conceptions, a rate of 40.4 per 1,000 females aged 15–17. Nearly half (49 per cent) of the pregnancies were terminated
- 7,296 under-16 conceptions, a rate of 7.7 per 1,000 females aged 13–15. Over half (60 per cent) of the pregnancies were terminated.

Wales¹⁵

In 2006, there were:

- 2,598 under-18 conceptions, a rate of 44.9 per 1,000 females aged 15–17. Over a third (42.6 per cent) of the pregnancies were terminated
- 496 under-16 conceptions, a rate of 8.6 per 1,000 females aged 13–15. Over half (53 per cent) of the pregnancies were terminated.

Scotland¹⁶

(Unlike England and Wales, Scottish conception data includes miscarriages managed in hospitals as well as registered births and abortions.)

In 2006, there were:

- 3,910 under-18 conceptions, a rate of 41.5 per 1,000 females aged 15–17. About 45 per cent of the pregnancies ended in abortion.
- 772 under-16 conceptions, a rate of 8.1 per 1,000 13–15-year-olds. Over half (59 per cent) of the pregnancies ended in abortion.

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Northern Ireland

- Conception data is not available for Northern Ireland, due to the lack of complete data on the number of women having abortions. Abortion is only legal in Northern Ireland in exceptional circumstances.
- In 2007, 235 teenagers travelled to England to have an abortion¹⁷, although this number is likely to be an underestimate.
- In 2006, there were 1,427 teenage births (under 20), a rate of 22.5 per 1,000 females aged 15–19¹⁸.

Abortion

England and Wales¹⁷

- In 2007, 20,289 women aged under 18 had an abortion. Of these, 4,376 were under 16.
- The under-18 abortion rate was 20.0 per 1,000 and the under-16 rate was 4.0.

Scotland¹⁹

- In 2007, 3,176 women aged 16–19 and 372 under-16s had an abortion.
- The abortion rate in 16–19-year-olds was 24.5 per 1,000.

Northern Ireland (See Teenage pregnancy section.)

Sexually transmitted infections²⁰

- The total number of new episodes of selected STIs in men and women aged 16–19 years seen at genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinics in the UK rose from 46,856 in 2003 to 58,133 in 2007, an increase of 24 per cent.
- In 2007, the highest rates of diagnoses among young people aged 16–19 were for chlamydia, genital warts and genital herpes. Rates were higher among women than men in this age group.
- Rates of diagnoses among women aged 16–19 were: chlamydia (1,423 per 100,000), genital warts (830 per 100,000), genital herpes (210 per 100,000), and gonorrhoea (137 per 100,000).

- Rates of diagnoses among men aged 16–19 were chlamydia (607 per 100,000), genital warts (322 per 100,000), gonorrhoea (106 per 100,000) and genital herpes (44 per 100,000).
- Results from the National Chlamydia Screening Programme in **England**²¹ in 2006–07 showed that around one in ten men and women aged 16–19 tested positive for chlamydia during the first four years of the programme.

Knowledge of STIs

In an Office for National Statistics survey of around 1,200 adults in **Great Britain**¹⁰:

- 87 per cent of men and 94 per cent of women aged 16–24 years knew that chlamydia is an STI.

Of those respondents who recognised chlamydia as an STI:

- 66 per cent of men and 73 per cent of women aged 16–24 years old knew that it doesn't always cause symptoms
- 44 per cent of men and 62 per cent of women aged 16–24 years old knew that it is easily treated by antibiotics.

An annual survey of school-aged children shows an apparent decline in anxiety about HIV and AIDS. In 1993, 27 per cent of males and 34 per cent of females aged 14–15 years said that they worried a lot or quite a lot about HIV and AIDS, compared with six per cent and eight per cent in 2003²².

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References

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- 22 Schools Health Education Unit, *Trends: Young People – Emotional Health and Well-Being* (Exeter: Schools Health Education Unit, 2004).

Other relevant fpa factsheets

The law on sex.

Teenage pregnancy (UK).

Teenage pregnancy (Northern Ireland).

Further information

For further information on the material covered in this factsheet, and other subjects related to sexual health, contact **fpa's** Library and Information Service.

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