

This factsheet provides information on the sexual behaviour of young people in Northern Ireland. The information is drawn from a number of research surveys carried out from 1999 to present.

Key facts

- Under a third of young people have sex before the age of 16 (the legal age of consent).
- Young men are more likely to have sex before they are 16 than young women.
- The sexual behaviour of young people in Northern Ireland is very similar to young people in Britain.

Overview of research

- *The health behaviour of school children in Northern Ireland* survey in 1999 included questions on sexual behaviour and contraception. Of the 4,465 12-16 year olds questioned, 665 indicated that they were sexually active.¹
- In 2001, some sexual health issues were included within the *Northern Ireland health and social wellbeing survey*. As part of this survey, 397 sexually active young people were questioned, compared with 535 in the *Towards better sexual health* survey.²
- The *Towards better sexual health* survey produced the first ever comprehensive Northern Ireland-wide data on the sexual behaviour of young people. One thousand young people aged between 14 and 25 completed a structured survey questionnaire, and 71 focus groups and 15 in-depth interviews also took place.³
- Research published by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) in 2002 looked at 6,300 pupils aged between 11 and 16 and found that 11% of respondents had had sexual intercourse, with the majority being 14 years of age at the time of first sex.⁴
- ACCORD's 2002 report surveyed 746 young people aged 15 (37%), 16 (62%) and 17 (1%) in Catholic maintained post-primary schools, of whom 29% indicated that they had experienced sexual intercourse.⁵
- In 2004, questions on sexual intercourse were included in a survey of risk behaviours in 14-15 year old school children, carried out by Love for Life.⁶
- In 2011, sexual health questions were incorporated into the 2011 Young Life and Times (YLT) survey. 1,434 respondents completed the survey, a response rate of 37%. YLT is an annual study of 16 year olds in Northern Ireland, undertaken by ARK.⁷
- For the first time in 2011/12 the Health Survey Northern Ireland included questions on sexual health. 4,390 responded to the survey, a response rate of 65%.⁸

Research findings

First sexual experience

The *Towards better sexual health* survey revealed the following:

- 53.3% of all respondents had experienced sexual intercourse. Of these, 36.7% had sex before the age of 17 and 27.4% had sex before the age of 16.
- Catholics were less likely than other respondents to have sex before the age of 16.
- 57.6% (61.5% males and 54.4% females) of sexually active respondents were happy with the timing of their first sexual intercourse. Reflecting on their first sexual intercourse,

young women were five times more likely than young men to say that they had not wanted to have sex at all.

- 42.6% of young men and 33.6% of young women said they were drunk when they first had sex.
- 10.3% of young men and 4.5% of young women said they had taken drugs when they first had sex.
- Sexually active respondents had had on average six sexual partners; young women had had on average five partners, and young men had had eight.³

In both the *Towards better sexual health* survey and the *Northern Ireland health and social wellbeing survey*, young men aged 16-24 years were almost twice as likely as young women to report first intercourse by the age of 16.^{2,3}

The *Young Life and Times* survey revealed that:

- Nearly three quarters of 16 year olds had not had sex, with a total of 26% of 16 year olds stating that they had sex.
- Of the respondents that had sex, a total of 46% were 16 years of age, 31% were 15 years of age and the remaining 22% were under 15 years of age.
- Males were more likely to have had sex before they were 16 years of age (61%) than females (49%).
- 30% stated that their first sexual intercourse happened on the spur of the moment, whilst 29% said they had planned it.
- Males were more likely than females to say it happened on the spur of the moment (40% and 23% respectively).
- Females were more likely than males to say that they had planned it with their partner (31% and 25% respectively).
- 10% of females compared to 1% of males said they did not want to have sex but felt they should or were forced into it.
- 62% said it happened at the right time, however, 34% felt it happened too early.
- 31% said that they were still in the relationship with their first partner, with 20% reporting that the relationship had not continued after they had sex.
- The majority (54%) said that they had one sexual partner only.
- Only 8% of respondents said that they had had more than five sexual partners.⁷

Reasons for having sex

The *Young Life and Times* survey found that curiosity (54%) and the feeling that sex seemed like a natural follow on to the relationship (46%) were the two main reasons both males and females said why they first had sex. The third most common reason overall given by respondents for having sex was that they were in love (37%).⁷

Access to and use of contraception

The *health behaviour of school children* survey reported that over two thirds of the 12-16 year olds questioned said they would find it easy to access contraception compared with 68.5% of 14-16 year olds in the *Towards better sexual health* survey.^{1,3} In both surveys, respondents were most likely to obtain contraception over the counter in chemists, shops or bars.

The *Pupils' sexual experience – young person's behaviour and attitude* survey found that 74% of respondents used some method of contraception when they first had sex.² In total, 62% said they would find it easy to obtain contraception and most said they would get it in shops, chemists, bars or public toilets.

The *Young Life and Times* survey found that the majority of respondents (81%) who had sex used a condom. 9% said they did not use any form of contraception or could not remember if they did. Regardless of whether they had sex or not, all respondents, were asked if they would find it easy to access contraception; 62% said they would. 26% of respondents who had sex had used emergency contraception. 16% had used this once, 8% two or three times and 2% more than three times.⁷

The *Health Survey Northern Ireland* found that younger males were most likely to carry/buy condoms when going out socially (44% of 16-24 year olds compared with 20% of 45-55 year olds). 33% of those aged 16-24 years strongly agreed that they were unlikely to have sex with a new partner without using condoms (compared with 42% of those aged 45-55).⁸

Family structure

ACCORD's research showed that the proportion of those who had experienced sexual intercourse increased when examined in the light of family structure; for example, of the 118 respondents who did not normally live with both parents, 46% had experienced sexual intercourse (compared to 29% overall in their survey).⁵

The *Towards better sexual health* survey revealed that young people who lived with both biological parents were better qualified at age 18, had higher educational aspirations and were less likely to have sex before the age of 16.³

Prevalence of sexual behaviour

Love for Life's survey concluded that since 2000, when comprehensive data on the sexual behaviour of young people was included in surveys, there has been no dramatic rise in the prevalence of sexual behaviour, or the age at which it begins.⁶

References

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6. Love for Life. *Risk behaviours in Northern Ireland: 14-15 year old school children*. Craigavon: Love for Life, 2005.
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8. DHSSPS. *Health Survey Northern Ireland 2011/12*. DHSSPS 2013

Other Northern Ireland factsheets

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 Relationships and sexuality education in schools
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