

Sexual behaviour

April 2009

Great Britain

Sources of information and major changes in behaviour

Until the 1990s there was little reliable information on the sexual behaviour of the general population in Great Britain. The emergence of AIDS in the 1980s provided the impetus for the first National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal), which was carried out in 1990¹. A second survey ten years later (Natsal 2000)^{2,3,4} enables us to assess how reported sexual behaviour has changed.

Since 1990 there have been significant changes in Britain's demographic structure, social attitudes and public awareness of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections, all of which may have influenced sexual behaviour.

Main changes since 1990:

- increased numbers of heterosexual partners ever and in the past five years
- more same sex experiences in the past five years
- more concurrent partnerships
- more oral and anal sex in the past year
- higher incidence of consistent condom use in the past four weeks
- more men reported paying for sex in the past five years.

A comparison of the two surveys concluded that while the increase in reported STI risk behaviour was likely to be due in part to real changes in behaviour, greater social tolerance and a willingness to report may also have had an effect⁵.

First intercourse²

- The average age at first intercourse has fallen from 17 to 16 for both men and women.

- Nearly a third (30 per cent) of men and a quarter (26 per cent) of women aged 16–19 first had sexual intercourse before the age of 16.
- About 80 per cent of people aged 16–24 said they had used a condom when they first had sex, compared with 40 per cent of those in their early 30s. Less than one in ten (7.4 per cent men, 9.8 per cent women) had used no contraception at all when they first had sex, compared with about 25 per cent of those in their early 30s.
- First sex was more likely to be unprotected for the youngest age groups. When first sex occurred at age 13–14, 31 per cent of men and 33.6 per cent of women didn't use condoms, and 18 per cent of men and 22 per cent of women used no contraception at all. This is much lower than in the 1990 survey when around 60 per cent of 13–14-year-old men and over half of 13–14-year-old women used no contraception when they first had sex.

Sexual partners³

(defined as someone with whom they had oral, anal or vaginal sex)

- The number of sexual partners that people have during their lifetime varies enormously between individuals. The majority (81.9 per cent men, 76.4 per cent women) have more than one over their lifetime.
- The average numbers of lifetime partners increased between 1990 and 2000, from 8.6 to 12.7 for men and from 3.7 to 6.5 for women. The proportion having ten or more partners in their lifetime also increased, from 31.4 per cent to 34.6 per cent of men, and from 9.7 per cent to 19.4 per cent of women.
- The average number of partners over the past five years was four for men and two for women. While nearly half had only one partner, some

Sexual behaviour (cont)

(8.4 per cent men, 3.6 per cent women) had ten or more partners. Those under 25 reported highest numbers of partners in the past five years, with 14.1 per cent of men and 9.2 per cent of women reporting ten or more.

- The proportion of men and women having more than one partner at the same time (concurrent) has increased. Over 14 per cent of men and 9 per cent of women in 2000 had been in such relationships in the past year, as opposed to 11.4 per cent and 5.4 per cent in 1990. The proportion was higher among younger age groups, with over 20 per cent of 15–24-year-old men and 15 per cent of 15–24-year-old women having concurrent partnerships in the past year.
- The proportion of both men and women who had ever had a same sex partner increased between 1990 and 2000, from 3.6 per cent to 5.4 per cent of men, and 1.8 per cent to 4.9 per cent of women. The proportion that had had a same sex partner in the past five years also increased from 1.5 per cent to 2.6 per cent men, and from 0.8 per cent to 2.6 per cent women.
- The proportion of men who had paid for sex within the past five years had doubled over the decade, from 2.1 per cent in 1990 to 4.3 per cent in 2000.
- Overall consistent condom use has increased, from 18.3 per cent to 24.4 per cent in men and from 14.9 per cent to 18 per cent in women. However, this increase is offset by increases in high-risk behaviour (see below).
- In the 2000 survey high-risk behaviour is defined as 'two or more heterosexual or homosexual partners in the last year, and inconsistent condom use in the past four weeks'. Incidence has risen from 13.6 per cent to 15.4 per cent in men and from 7.1 per cent to 10 per cent in women between 1990 and 2000.

Sexual activity

- The average frequency of heterosexual intercourse per month was 6.4 for men and 6.5 for women.

- Over three-quarters of both men and women had experienced oral sex in the past year, a slight increase over ten years ago.
- More than one in ten had had anal intercourse (12.3 per cent men, 11.3 per cent of women) in the past year, a substantial increase since the 1990 survey when the proportions were 7 per cent and 6.5 per cent respectively.

Sexual problems

- One in 16 (6.2 per cent) men and one in six (15.6 per cent) women had experienced a sexual problem in the previous year which lasted at least six months. The most common problem for men was premature orgasm, and for women lack of interest in sex⁶.
- Shorter term problems (of at least one month) had been experienced by about a third of men and over half of women.

Northern Ireland

The Natsal surveys did not extend to Northern Ireland. However, a major survey of the sexual attitudes and lifestyles of 14–25-year-olds was carried out in 2000⁷. The main findings are very similar to those for Great Britain.

- About a third of young people had first had sex before 17, the legal age of consent in Northern Ireland at the time (now amended to 16), and over a quarter before 16. The average age at first sex was 15.6 years (15 for men and 16 for women), about the same as in Great Britain.
- Nearly three-quarters (72.4 per cent) had used contraception when they first had sex. Over a third (36 per cent) had used condoms alone, over a quarter (27.8 per cent) used condoms in addition to another method, and 8.6 per cent used another method.
- One in nine (10.9 per cent) men and one in 28 (3.6 per cent) women reported sex with a same sex partner on at least one occasion. About 2 per cent (2.4 per cent men, 1.4 per cent women) said they had only ever been attracted to the same sex.

Sexual behaviour (cont)

References

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- 5 Copas A J et al, 'The accuracy of reported sensitive sexual behaviour in Britain: exploring the extent of change 1990–2000', *Sexually Transmitted Infections*, vol 78, no 1, February (2002), 26–30.
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