

Sexual Health Week 2016

12-18 September



talking sense about sex

Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)

Sexually transmitted infection (STI) rates in the UK remain high but talking about sex and STIs can still be taboo. Myths and misconceptions about transmission, symptoms and risk factors persist, and there can be a number of barriers to condom use and STI testing.

We surveyed more than 2,000 people aged 16 and over across the UK*, to find out what they know about STIs and how they feel about testing and condom use.

More than two-thirds (68%) told us they had never had an STI test.

Only 9% had learnt how to confidently talk to a partner about using condoms.

Just 10% learnt about the risk of STIs being passed on during oral sex.

Only 11% learnt about using condoms in the context of enjoying sex.

Just 8% learnt about dealing with pressure to have sex without a condom.

18% said they thought it can be embarrassing to buy condoms.

21% said they had not used a condom because they don't enjoy sex as much.

15% of 16-24-year-olds said they had not used a condom because they thought it would ruin the mood.

See the full results at fpa.org.uk/SHW16

How you can help

Health professionals are in a unique position to help inform and reinforce positive health messages, even if you're not directly involved in STI care on a daily basis.

Open, honest conversation. Almost one-third of people in our survey said they thought it's easier to have sex than to talk about it. Maintain a sex positive approach; prevention messages can sometimes feel detached from the main reason people have sex – for pleasure. You can help overcome some issues around condom use by treating them as an aid to enjoyment, rather than a barrier.

Know your local services. Make sure you can signpost to services which you can't offer yourself. Making patients aware of C-Card schemes or free online testing schemes running in your area could make all the difference.

Don't forget older people. Condom and testing campaigns are often targeted at under 25s as they are the age group most at risk of STIs. But many older people begin new sexual relationships in later life – and a lack of quality SRE at schools and a feeling that sexual health messages are not relevant to them can mean they put themselves at risk.

Tips for clinicians

- When talking to patients about condom use or risky behaviour, ask open questions so you can explore what issues they might be facing, and help find solutions that work for them.
- Make sure you have a range of condoms available to give out, including non-latex and different shapes and sizes. Some men may benefit from being able to experiment with different condoms on their own and during masturbation, to find which are best for them.
- For some men, using condoms can help tackle premature ejaculation, so talk about condoms in a way which enhances pleasure.
- Even if a patient says they don't want to, and won't, use condoms, it's worth showing them how to correctly put on a condom and explaining the different kinds. They may change their mind in future or they may have made their decision due to not knowing what's available.
- Remind, or inform, patients about female condoms and dams. Awareness of STI transmission through oral sex may be low.
- Patients who say their partners don't want to use condoms could benefit from role play where they can practice ways to challenge condom avoidance.
- Patients don't necessarily know how to ask for what they need from sexual health services, or what is on offer – this was highlighted as a gap in people's knowledge in our survey – so make sure they are aware of the different issues they can ask about and discuss.

Tips for pharmacists

Pharmacies are great for reaching people who may not engage with traditional health settings. Many now offer vital services such as chlamydia screening and free condoms, as well as being able to signpost to other local services.

- Clearly advertise the services you offer, including the opportunity to have a private, confidential conversation. This could be the prompt somebody needs.
- Don't make assumptions about customers and their sexual health needs – anyone can have gaps in their knowledge and be in need of support.
- Back up products you offer, for example condoms and STI tests, with supporting information. You might find displaying FPA's patient information leaflets helpful for customers to take away.

Useful guidance

- BASSH: Clinical Effectiveness Group Guidelines
bashh.org/BASHH/Guidelines/Guidelines.aspx
- NICE: Sexually transmitted infections and under-18 conceptions prevention
nice.org.uk/guidance/ph3
- NICE: Sexually transmitted infections: condom distribution schemes (draft)
nice.org.uk/guidance/indevelopment/gid-phg93/consultation/html-content

How FPA can help you

Visit fpa.org.uk/SHW16 for more information, resources and support. Our training team runs courses on STIs and also offers tailored training for pharmacists.

You can order information and resources on STIs, as well as on contraception, pregnancy choices and reproduction from fpa.org.uk/shop

* Survey of 2,079 people in the UK aged 16+ who have ever been sexually active. All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from Atomik Research. Fieldwork was undertaken between 27 July and 1 August 2016. The survey was carried out online. The sample figures are representative of all UK people aged 16 and over.