

## Teenagers: sexual health and behaviour

January 2011

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 the **UK**, the age of consent to any form of sexual activity is 16 for both men and women, whether they are heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual<sup>1, 2, 3</sup>.

### 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**<sup>4</sup>, 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 lifetime<sup>4</sup>
- 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 year<sup>5</sup>.

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 14–25<sup>6</sup>. 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 at that time) 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 2002<sup>7</sup> included over 16,000 gay and other homosexually active men in the **UK** aged between 14–83.

- The average age at which men first had any sexual experience with another man was 17.5 years.

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- 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 women<sup>8</sup>, 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 more<sup>9</sup>.

### Use of contraception

An Office for National Statistics (ONS) survey<sup>10</sup> of women aged 16–49 in **Great Britain** found that among 16–19 year olds in 2008–09:

- 57 per cent said they used contraception
- among these, 65 per cent said they used condoms and 54 per cent the pill (some will use both)
- 88 per cent had heard of emergency hormonal contraception (EHC)
- 17 per cent had used EHC at least once in the previous 12 months.

There is no equivalent survey data on contraceptive usage in **Northern Ireland**.

### Use of contraceptive clinic services

- 71,000 women aged under 16 attended family planning clinics in **England** in 2009–10. This represented 7.9 per cent of the resident population, a slight decrease from 2008–9<sup>11</sup>.
- 281,000 or 21.5 per cent of the resident female population in **England** aged 16–19 years of age visited a family planning clinic in 2009–10, a slight increase from 2008–09<sup>11</sup>.

### Teenage pregnancy

- The UK has the highest teenage birth and abortion rates in Western Europe<sup>12</sup>.

#### England<sup>13</sup>

In 2008, there were:

- 38,750 under-18 conceptions, a rate of 40.5 per 1,000 females aged 15–17. Nearly half (49.7 per cent) of the pregnancies ended in abortion.
- 7,123 under-16 conceptions, a rate of 7.8 per 1,000 females aged 13–15. Over half (61.8 per cent) of the pregnancies ended in abortion.
- Between 1998 and 2008 the teenage conception rate fell by 13.3 per cent in under-18s, and by 11.7 per cent in under-16s.

#### Wales<sup>14</sup>

In 2008, there were:

- 2,578 under-18 conceptions, a rate of 44.3 per 1,000 females aged 15–17. Nearly half (44.1 per cent) of the pregnancies ended in abortion.
- 455 under-16 conceptions, a rate of 8.3 per 1,000 females aged 13–15. Over half (57.1 per cent) of the pregnancies ended in abortion.
- Between 2000 and 2008 the teenage conception rate fell by 7.7 per cent in under-18s and by 5.7 per cent in under-16s.

#### Scotland<sup>15</sup>

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

In 2008, there were:

- 3,857 under-18 conceptions, a rate of 40.4 per 1,000 females aged 15–17. About 45 per cent of the pregnancies ended in abortion.
- 713 under-16 conceptions, a rate of 7.9 per 1,000 13–15-year-olds. Over half (61.9 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 2009, 185 women aged under 20 travelled to England to have an abortion<sup>16</sup>, although this number is likely to be an underestimate.
- In 2009, there were 1,334 teenage births (under 20), a rate of 21.8 per 1,000 females aged 15–19<sup>17</sup>.

### Abortion

#### England and Wales<sup>16</sup>

- In 2009, 17,916 women aged under 18 had an abortion. Of these, 3,823 were under 16.
- The under-18 abortion rate was 18.0 per 1,000 and the under-16 rate was 4.0.

#### Scotland<sup>18</sup>

- In 2009, 2,870 women aged 16–19 and 344 under-16s had an abortion.
- The abortion rate in 16–19-year-olds was 22.3 per 1,000.

**Northern Ireland** (See Teenage pregnancy section.)

### Sexually transmitted infections<sup>19</sup>

- Young people aged less than 25 years experience the highest rates of STIs in the UK.
- The peak age for an STI in women is between 19 and 20 years, and in men between 20 and 23 years.
- Of all 16–19 year olds diagnosed with an STI in 2009, at least 11 per cent of women and 12 per cent of men will become re-infected within a year.
- In 2009 there were fewer new cases of gonorrhoea (3,324/3,452), genital herpes (4,217/4,358) and genital warts (18,235/18,695) diagnosed in 16–19 year olds than in 2008.

- Chlamydia diagnoses in teenagers increased in 2009, from 73,224 in 2008 to 79,720. These figures include diagnoses made in genitourinary medicine clinics and in a variety of community settings involved in the National Chlamydia Screening programme in England.

### Knowledge of STIs

In an Office for National Statistics survey of over 12,000 adults in **Great Britain**<sup>10</sup>:

- nine out of ten people aged 16–24 years knew that chlamydia is an STI.

Of those respondents who recognised chlamydia as an STI:

- 62 per cent of men and 83 per cent of women aged 16–24 years old knew that it doesn't always cause symptoms
- 46 per cent of men and 64 per cent of women aged 16–24 years old knew that it is easily treated by antibiotics.

## Teenagers: sexual health and behaviour (cont)

### References

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- 2 *Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2008*. <<http://www.legislation.gov.uk>>
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- 4 Wellings K et al, 'Sexual behaviour in Britain: early heterosexual experience', *Lancet*, vol 358, (2001), 1843–1850.
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- 18 ISD Scotland, *Abortion Statistics, year ending December 2009*. <<http://www.isdscotland.org>>, accessed 6 July 2010.
- 19 Health Protection Agency, 'STI annual data tables'. <<http://www.hpa.org.uk>>, accessed 15 November 2010.

### Other relevant FPA factsheets

Sexual behaviour and young people (Northern Ireland).

The law on sex.

Teenage pregnancy (UK).

Teenage pregnancy (Northern Ireland).

**sexual health direct** is supported by the Department of Health.