

Contraceptive Methods Used by Sexually Active Irish Adolescents

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INTRODUCTION

The Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study is a cross-national research project which aims to increase the understanding of young peoples' health, well-being and behaviours. The findings are used to inform and influence population health, health services and health education policy and practice at local, national and international levels, in addition to contributing to the academic literature. The inclusion of four sexual behaviour questions has been mandatory for 15 year old participants in HBSC since 2002. Due to practical, political and ethical reasons, these questions have only been included in Ireland since 2010.

OBJECTIVE

To document contraceptive methods reported by sexually active Irish adolescents aged 15-17.

METHODOLOGY

Census data were used to ensure that the study accessed a nationally representative sample of school-aged children. School principals were approached by post and HBSC questionnaires in English or Irish were offered. Questionnaires were provided to students along with blank envelopes to facilitate anonymity, information sheets for teachers, parental consent forms where necessary and classroom feedback forms. Data were collected from 16,040 children, of whom 4,367 were aged between 15-17 years. Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the National University of Ireland, Galway and consent from schools, parents and children was obtained where required.

The sexual behaviour questions are designed to measure the proportion of students who have engaged in sexual intercourse, the age of sexual initiation and the extent to which students are protected against pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). In order to address pregnancy prevention, participants were asked about the method(s) of contraception used at last intercourse. Possible response options included two reliable methods of contraception - 'birth control pills' and 'condoms' and one non-reliable but frequently reported method - 'withdrawal'. In addition, the response options 'no method was used to prevent pregnancy' and 'not sure' were offered. Participants were also provided with space to report other methods of pregnancy prevention used at last intercourse.

RESULTS

Table 1 - Contraception at Last Intercourse Reported by Sexually Active Irish 15-17 Year Olds

Contraceptive Method	% within the sexually active population
Condom	73.6
Birth Control Pill	21.9
Withdrawal Method	14.5
No Method	7.6
Not Sure	3.6
<i>Injection</i>	<i>0.19</i>
<i>Implant</i>	<i>1.0</i>
<i>Patch</i>	<i>0.19</i>
<i>Morning After Pill</i>	<i>0.09</i>

(Multiple methods were reported; italics derived from the open question)

Of the 4,367 participants, 23.3% reported being sexually active. 'Condom' use was the most frequently reported method of contraception followed by the 'birth control pill' and 'withdrawal'. Almost 17% reported dual use of condom and birth control pill. Fewer than 2% reported using other reliable methods of contraception, and a tiny minority reported a range of unreliable or inappropriate methods, for example crisp packets. Around 8% of the sexually active adolescents reported engaging in unprotected sex.

CONCLUSION

Sexually active adolescents report condoms, birth control pills and withdrawal as the most frequent method of contraception. Other contraceptive methods are not widely reported. The majority of sexually active Irish adolescents report employing some method of pregnancy prevention, however a small proportion report engaging in unprotected or poorly protected sex bringing the risk of unintended pregnancy, STIs, abortion and associated risk.

FUNDING

The Irish HBSC Study is funded by the Department of Health. The Adolescent Sexual Health in Ireland: Data, Dissemination and Development Study is funded by the IRC and the HSE Crisis Pregnancy Programme. We would like to thank the school principals, teachers and students for their time.