



## Original Research

# Association between age at first sexual intercourse and knowledge, attitudes and practices regarding reproductive health and unplanned pregnancy: a cross-sectional study



C. Shu<sup>a</sup>, A. Fu<sup>b</sup>, J. Lu<sup>a</sup>, M. Yin<sup>a</sup>, Y. Chen<sup>a</sup>, T. Qin<sup>a</sup>, X. Shang<sup>c</sup>,  
X. Wang<sup>d</sup>, M. Zhang<sup>d</sup>, C. Xiong<sup>e</sup>, P. Yin<sup>a,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, School of Public Health, Tongji Medical College, Huazhong University of Science and Technology, Wuhan, Hubei, China

<sup>b</sup> Department of Nursing, Wuhan Central Hospital, Wuhan, Hubei, China

<sup>c</sup> Institute of Laboratory Medicine, Jinling Hospital, Nanjing University School of Medicine, Nanjing, Jiangsu, China

<sup>d</sup> Sexual Health Education Research Centre, Institute for Population and Family Planning of Chongqing City, Chongqing, China

<sup>e</sup> Institute of Family Planning, Tongji Medical College, Huazhong University of Science and Technology, Wuhan, Hubei, China

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Age at first sexual intercourse (AFSI) is decreasing among adolescents in developed nations. An early sexual debut has been associated, to some extent, with multiple sexual partners, infrequent use of condoms, unplanned pregnancy, unsafe abortion, and sexually transmitted disease and human immunodeficiency virus infection. Unplanned pregnancy among adolescents has both physical and social adverse effects.

**Methods:** In total, 78,400 self-administered anonymous questionnaires were distributed to college students in seven cities in China to determine the age at which Chinese college students first engage in sexual activity, and the association between AFSI and knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) regarding reproductive health and unplanned pregnancy.

**Results:** Approximately 10,164 students reported that they were sexually active, and most reported that they had engaged in sexual intercourse for the first time during college. The average AFSI was 20.14 [standard deviation (SD) 2.98] years, and the average AFSI by gender was 19.97 (SD 2.97) years for males and 20.41 (SD 2.97) years for females. The unplanned pregnancy rate among the participants was 34.03%. Participants lacked knowledge about contraception and reproductive health, although most believed that it is necessary to have this knowledge. Participants' attitudes towards premarital sex were varied. Factors that were found to be associated with unplanned pregnancy were AFSI, contraceptive methods used for first sexual act, and whether contraceptive methods were used for every sexual act.

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +86 13098818499; fax: +86 27 83692333.

E-mail address: [pingyin2000@126.com](mailto:pingyin2000@126.com) (P. Yin).

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**Conclusions:** The college period is a key time for Chinese students in terms of becoming sexually active. As such, comprehensive and informative reproductive health education should be provided before and during the college period. Furthermore, reproductive health education should include appropriate sexual morality education and comprehensive sex education. Gender traits and needs should be considered in sex education.

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## Introduction

Many studies in the field of human sexuality have found that the transition in status associated with first sexual intercourse has considerable significance for the individual.<sup>1</sup> Commencement of sexual activity is likely to be related to an adolescent's perception of their transition to adulthood.<sup>2</sup> Worldwide, the average age of first sexual (vaginal) intercourse (AFSI) among adolescents is 16–18 years.<sup>3–5</sup> However, some studies have reported a decreasing trend in AFSI among adolescents around the world.<sup>6–8</sup> Early onset of sexual activity has been associated, to some extent, with multiple sexual partners, infrequent use of condoms, unplanned pregnancy, unsafe abortion, and sexually transmitted disease and human immunodeficiency virus infection.<sup>1,9</sup> According to a 2014 report by the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately 22 million girls aged 15–24 years experienced unplanned pregnancies that resulted in unsafe abortions. Among these unsafe abortions, approximately 15% involved girls aged 15–19 years and 26% involved young women aged 20–24 years.<sup>10</sup> A 2012 WHO report indicated that young pregnant girls face a higher risk of complications and death than older pregnant women; pregnant girls aged 15–24 years account for 23% of the overall burden of disease caused by pregnancy and childbirth among women of all ages. Unplanned pregnancy in young girls can also have adverse social consequences, such as school drop-out, violence and suicide.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it is critical to reduce the number of unplanned pregnancies among adolescents.

Over the past three decades, China has experienced dramatic social changes as a result of rapid economic growth and reform. Under the multiple influences of rapid modernization, economic development and exposure to Western culture, sexual attitudes among Chinese people have changed considerably.<sup>12</sup> Premarital sex is increasingly accepted by young people in China.<sup>13</sup> A report in 2000 indicated that the AFSI was 3 years younger than the peak age reported in the previous decade.<sup>14</sup> The results of a survey of 1326 Chinese college students conducted in Hunan indicated that 14% were sexually active and that risk behaviours tended to increase with age.<sup>15</sup> A study conducted in Wuhan, titled 'Sexual and contraceptive behaviours among Chinese female undergraduate students', reported that approximately 11% of students experienced their first sexual act before the age of 18 years, and almost half of all students had engaged in sexual intercourse for the first time within 1 year of turning 18 years old.<sup>16</sup> With college students being likely to initiate sexual intercourse

earlier than ever before, the effect of an early sexual debut needs particular attention. Although these previous studies indicated that early sexual intercourse was related to subsequent risk behaviours, the relationship between AFSI and KAP regarding reproductive health has received little attention. As information about KAP would help to elucidate the potential obstacles to the activities proposed for implementation,<sup>17</sup> understanding the relationship between AFSI and KAP would help to explain the relationship between AFSI and unplanned pregnancy. In addition, few studies have used large sample sizes and a nationwide scope to investigate KAP regarding reproductive health and unplanned pregnancy among students at Chinese universities. Most previous studies were conducted in one city or one province. As such, this cross-sectional study was conducted in 49 universities in seven cities from the different regions of China to examine AFSI of Chinese college students, and the association between AFSI and KAP regarding reproductive health and unplanned pregnancy.

## Methods

### Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the Ethical Committee of the School of Public Health, Tongji Medical College, Huazhong University of Science and Technology, Wuhan, China. All surveys were administered in accordance with relevant guidelines, and all participants provided written informed consent. In addition, consent was obtained from the Departments of Student Affairs at the relevant universities.

### Sample

This survey used a stratified cluster sampling method to enrol participants from 49 universities in seven cities. Twelve universities were in North China (Beijing and Changchun), 16 were in West China (Chongqing and Chengdu), seven were in East China (Nanjing), seven were in South China (Nanning), and seven were in Central China (Wuhan). To ensure that the sample was representative, the type of university (comprehensive key university, comprehensive general university, medical university or medical college of comprehensive university, and art university) and level of education (undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral students) were considered when participants were enrolled. Two hundred undergraduate students, 150

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