



## Sexual intercourse and current contraceptive use among university students in Finland

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### Abstract

**Objective:** To ascertain the current frequency of sexual intercourse, the current use of contraceptives, the ever use of emergency contraception, and the ever experience of condom failure among Finnish university students.

**Study design:** The study population consisted of Finnish undergraduate university students (19–34 years of age) in 2004. The randomly selected sample comprised 5030 subjects. The data were collected by postal questionnaire, the response rate being 62.7%. Data were presented with frequency distributions and cross-tabulations. Chi-square test was used. Frequencies for women and men were presented and tested separately.

**Results:** A total of 80% of students were currently practicing sexual intercourse. Approximately half of the female students currently used hormonal contraception and one-third used a condom. Almost half of the men currently used a condom. The simultaneous use of condom and hormonal contraception was rare. Condom failure was common. The ever use of emergency contraception appeared to be associated with condom failure.

**Conclusion:** Of Finnish university students 80% were sexually active and hormonal contraceptives were the most popular method of contraception among female students. The use of the condom should be practiced more often for prevention of sexually transmitted diseases.

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### 1. Introduction

The trend during the past decades in Western Countries has been to postpone the birth of a first child to a later age, especially among highly educated women [1,2]. In Finland the median age at first birth was 27.8 years in the year 2004 [3]. The need for contraception among university-aged students in Finland is obvious, since university students are at the age of active sexual life and they wish to postpone pregnancy until completion of studies [4]. The age of

undergraduate university students in Finland is relatively high, with more than half are over 25-year old [5]. This is generally higher than in other parts of Europe [6].

The use of contraception among Finnish university students was studied for the first time in 1979–1980 [7]. Among first-year students (mean age 21.9) attending health check-ups, 38% of men and 45% of women reported having no need for contraception. About half of the men and one third of the women reported having used a condom occasionally or consistently during the previous 6 months. A quarter of female students and of male students' partners had used oral contraceptives.

Finnish university students' health and health related issues were researched in the year 2000 [8]. The questionnaire included one item on the use of oral

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contraceptives and 51% of female university students reported current use of oral contraceptives. A study about users of emergency contraception was made in Tampere University in 2000–2001 [9]. Two-thirds of respondents had experienced condom failure and consequently had needed emergency contraception.

University students have a health care organization of their own; the Finnish Student Health Service (FSHS) which has existed since 1954 and provides primary health care services, including contraception services, for all university students in 16 cities in Finland. The FSHS is financed by the Social Insurance Institution, the students and student unions, the university cities and the State of Finland. Students pay a yearly health care fee of € 35 as part of the student unions' obligatory membership fee. In addition to this health care subscription patients are charged small fees for consultations and treatment by specialist doctors. Consultations with a general practitioner or nurse, X-ray examinations and laboratory tests, health check-ups and initial mental health counseling periods (1–5 first sessions) are free of charge. The services are easily accessible and practically all university students use them.

It has been possible to evaluate the use of family planning services in the FSHS through the long-term registration of coded data on the reasons for physician encounter [10]. Contraception has been the most common single reason for physician consultation in the FSHS during the last 20 years. The proportion of contraception contacts has been about 12% of all physician consultations. The majority of these consultations have concerned oral contraceptives. The number of consultations concerning induced abortions has been low and it decreased from 4 to 3 per 1000 female students in 1986–2003.

The Finnish University Student Health Survey was made in 2004 [11]. According to this survey 7.5% of students (age 19–35) had children and 88.6% of them desired to have children in the future. Of men 4.6% and of women 7% had experienced sexually transmitted Chlamydia. The number of induced abortions among female university students was low, with 4.5% of them having undergone induced abortion. Childbearing and the desire to have children has been described in more detail elsewhere [12].

The objective here was to report Finnish university students' current frequency of sexual intercourse, the current use of contraceptives, ever use of emergency contraception (EC) and experiences of condom failure (ever). Another objective was to study how current frequency of sexual intercourse was connected with the current use of contraceptives, and to explore these responses by gender, age and relationships.

## 2. Material and methods

The data was derived from a national health survey among Finnish university students 2004 [11]. The anon-

ymous 20 page questionnaire included questions concerning students' health, health behavior, study, and living circumstances. There were altogether 112 questions leading to 277 variables, including questions specifically related to students' sexual activity and the use of contraception.

The survey was carried out among Finnish university students, who are entitled to receive health care services provided by the FSHS. The study population comprised 101,805 Finnish undergraduate university students less than 35 years of age. A random sample of 5030 students, of whom 45.7% were male, was drawn from this population. The study material was collected by means of a postal questionnaire, with three repeat mailings. The study was approved by the medical ethics committee of the Hospital District of Southwest Finland, and the students gave informed consent to participate by answering the questionnaire. The response rate was 62.7% (49.2% for males and 74.0% for females). The mean age of respondents was 24.5 years. Approximately two thirds of the totals were 22–29-year old (Table 1). The respondents were a good representation of the study population with respect to gender, age, University City and field of study.

Students' relationships were investigated by a structured question of students' living arrangements with the following possible answers:

1. single in own household or in student halls of residence,
2. collective housing,
3. living together with partner,
4. living together with partner and children,
5. living alone with child,
6. living with parents,
7. other.

The alternatives 1, 2, 6 and 7 were categorized together as being single.

Concerning sexual activity and the use of contraception the following questions were asked of both men and women:

How often do you currently have sexual intercourse? There were three answers from which to choose: never; less than once a week; once a week or more often.

Which contraceptive method do you currently use? There was an instruction that one could choose more than one answer if needed. The possible answers were:

Table 1  
The Finnish university students' health survey 2004, respondents by age group and gender

Age group	Men		Women	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Under 22	192	17.0	479	23.7
22–24	407	36.0	683	33.8
25–29	419	37.0	664	32.9
30–34	114	10.1	195	9.6
All	1132	100.0	2021	100.0

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