

REPORT**Sexual Activity and Condom Use among Israeli Adolescents**

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. In Israel, as in other industrialized countries, the age of sexual debut among adolescents has declined, and the rate of sexually transmitted infections (STI) has risen, but the motivations and attitudes of Israeli adolescents toward carrying condoms have yet to be studied.

Aims. The aims of this study were to establish the associations (if any) between demographic characteristics and the knowledge held by Jewish Israeli adolescents about HIV transmission, their attitudes toward condom use and sexual experience, and to explore their recommendations to increase condom use.

Methods. The method used was an analysis of sexual experience and practices, attitudes toward condom carrying and condom use among a national representative sample of Jewish adolescents aged 15–18.

Main Outcome Measures. Two dichotomized measures were assessed: (i) sexual experience (defined as having had previous consensual oral/vaginal/anal sex); and (ii) the practice of carrying a condom on a regular basis.

Results. Of all 410 participants, 14.6% carried condoms, 18.3% had sexual experience, and 70.7% of those used condoms. Those who thought condoms to be protective against HIV, and those who thought they are difficult to wear, were more likely to have sexual experience. The perception of condom use as important, and the perception that condoms are difficult to wear, were predictors of condom carrying. The participants' knowledge of the risk of HIV in vaginal intercourse was deficient. Participants did not consider school sex education to be effective in promoting condom use, and recommended the use of graphic, deterrent personal accounts told by youths to encourage wider use of condoms.

Conclusions. Health educators should consider the barriers cited by adolescents and the deterrent techniques they recommend when planning interventions to encourage condom use. **Shilo G and Mor Z. Sexual activity and condom use among Israeli adolescents. J Sex Med 2015;12:1732–1736.**

Key Words. Adolescents; Attitudes; Condom Use; Israel

Introduction

The age of sexual debut among adolescents in industrialized countries, including Israel, has declined, while the rate of sexually transmitted infections (STI) is rising [1–3]. Condoms are considered the most effective method of preventing STI and unplanned pregnancies, and the most commonly used form of contraception by adolescents in many countries [3]. During puberty, when erotic interest and sexual activity increase, condom carrying is usually defined as a planned behavior,

and as one of the self-efficacy factors for protected sexual activity. Planned behavior theory links together individual beliefs, intentions, and behaviors, and points to the intention to use condoms as one of the strongest predictors of condom use among adolescents [4].

According to a report by the World Health Organization, the incidence of sexually active adolescent girls in Israel rose between 1994 and 2006, while the incidence of adolescents using a condom during their most recent sexual intercourse dropped by 20% [3]. Between 2005 and 2012, the

annual number of newly diagnosed *Chlamydia trachomatis* among the adolescent population in Israel increased (Dr. Dan Gandeco, Division of Epidemiology, Ministry of Health, personal communication).

Coitus initiation among Israeli adolescents is less prevalent than in other Western countries, because of the societal influence of stable familial structure, and a social discourse about sexual intercourse being part of a stable relationship [5]. The Ministry of Education is responsible for sex education in Israel, and its “Life Skills” program includes lessons on safe sex for Israeli adolescents, but reports reveal that not all schools teach this material as part of the program [6].

Aims

Despite the increased risk of STI acquisition in adolescents, the motivations and attitudes of adolescents in Israel toward carrying condoms have yet to be studied. The present study aimed to determine the associations between demographic characteristics and Jewish Israeli-born adolescents’ knowledge about HIV transmission, attitudes toward condom use, and sexual experience; and to explore the recommendations put forward by these adolescents to encourage wider condom use.

Methods

Sample and Procedure

This cross-sectional study was approved by the E. Wolfson Medical Center Institutional Review Board (WOMC-0133-11) and conducted in Israel in 2012, using a sample of 410 participants aged 15–18 years, randomly drawn from a panel of 80,000 Jewish–Israeli adolescents, which mirrors the demographic characteristics and geographic distributions of this age group in the general Jewish–Israeli population [7] (see Table 1). Study participants were asked to complete the anonymous survey electronically. After signing a consent form, participants were asked to complete an anonymous survey about their sexual practices, condom carrying habits, knowledge about HIV/STI transmission, and attitudes toward condom use. Most questions were adopted from the Youth Risk Behaviour Survey [3]. All study participants received a monetary compensation equivalent to US\$ 30 for the time spent in completing the questionnaire.

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of study sample compared with Israeli population of the same age group

Characteristic	Sample (N = 410)	Israeli population*	P
Sex			
Male	204 (49.8)	177,400 (49.1)	0.09
Female	206 (50.2)	184,600 (50.9)	
Geographic area			
Jerusalem	48 (11.7)	51,300 (13.2)	0.3
North and Haifa	95 (23.2)	91,400 (24.2)	
Tel Aviv and central region	188 (45.5)	160,800 (44.4)	
South	79 (19.3)	67,300 (18.5)	
Religiosity			
Secular	209 (51.0)	180,917 (49.9)	0.1
Traditional	131 (32.0)	111,336 (30.9)	
Religious	70 (17.0)	69,551 (19.2)	

*Israeli central Bureau of Statistics [7].

Measures

Main Outcome Measures

Two dichotomized outcome *variables* were assessed: (i) sexual experience (defined as having had previous consensual oral/vaginal/anal sex); and (ii) The practice of carrying a condom on a regular basis (“I carry a condom most of the time”).

Independent Variables

HIV Knowledge

This was assessed by means of four questions about the possibility of HIV transmission through kissing, unprotected oral, vaginal or anal sex. Correct answers were that the possibility of HIV transmission during oral sex and kissing is very low, while the opposite is true for vaginal and anal sex.

Attitudes Toward Condom Use

Participants were asked to report if they agree with six statements: “A condom suggests instability and mistrust in a relationship”; “Using condom disrupts spontaneity in sex”; “It is important to carry a condom”; “A condom protects me from HIV”; “Condoms are difficult to wear”; “It is embarrassing to buy condoms.”

Sexual Practices

Participants were asked to report the gender of their sexual partners (male, female, or both; those who reported having same-sex partners were defined as gays/lesbians); their age at the time of their first sexual experience; whether they had one or more steady or casual sex partners (or both); the main birth control technique they use; and the frequency of their condom use in the previous 6 months. In addition, they were asked to report

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