



Sexual Behaviour and Lack of Knowledge Threaten Health of Canadian Teens

New Benchmark survey reveals teens need more info about STIs and too many practice unsafe sex

Source: Canadian Association for Adolescent Health 2006 survey on adolescent sexuality

According to a new national survey by the Canadian Association for Adolescent Health (CAAH) and Ipsos, although many Canadian teens are responsible when it comes to sex and sexuality, there are still major areas of concern. Too many teens are engaging in sexual behaviours that threaten their health; there are major gaps in information on STIs and their consequences; there are barriers to getting information on sexual health; and parents, although important figures for their adolescents with regards to sexuality, underestimate their role.

Risky business

Canada's half million sexually active teens between the ages of 14 and 17 have had three sexual partners on average. 24 percent of sexually active Canadian teens between the ages of 14 and 17 did not use any protection against sexually transmitted infections (STIs) the last time they had sex. And 68 per cent have engaged in oral sex, although many are unaware that STIs can be transmitted through this particular sexual activity. 38 per cent of them engage in casual sex. Another 16 per cent admit that their partner had other sexual partners while dating them. (Note. These data have sometimes been misinterpreted. All the percentages in this paragraph refer to % of sexually active teens).

Yet 90 per cent of Canadian teens claim to be very (19 per cent) or

somewhat (71 per cent) knowledgeable about sex and sexual health. Not only does this claim run counter to their actual behaviour, considering the increasing prevalence of STIs, it is also undermined by their widespread lack of knowledge of the most common sexually transmitted infection – only 19 per cent have ever heard of HPV, the cause of genital warts and cervical cancer. HIV, on the other hand, is reported most often by teens as a common STI, despite its very low prevalence compared to all others.

Information gap and barriers

Teens' lack of knowledge about STIs and their consequences is unfortunately exacerbated by the difficulties in obtaining sexual health information. Some 62 per cent said they faced obstacles to getting answers on sexual health, such as their own discomfort talking about sex. As for sex education in schools, only 23 per cent of teens feel it is very useful.

Vocabulary can be a barrier too. For example, 22 percent of Canadian teens and 30 per cent of mothers include masturbation in their definition of "sexual intercourse". And when asked to define sexual abstinence, for 26 per cent of teens, it appears that practicing oral sex is compatible with abstinence. These differences in interpretation might prevent some teenagers from getting the sex information they need.

Parents play a bigger role than expected

Parents will be surprised to learn that they are in fact the real teen role models when it comes to sex, not movie, music, sport and TV stars. Parents are also considered a major source of information on sex and sexual health by their teenagers (63 per cent) and nearly half (43 per cent) consider their parents to be the most useful and valuable source of information. Unfortunately, 38 per cent of teens have not discussed sex and sexuality with their mothers.

For more information please visit <http://www.acsa-caah.ca/ang/pdf/misc/research.pdf> to access the full report of this survey or visit the CAAH website at <http://www.acsa-caah.ca/ang/home.html>

