

BMJ SEXUAL & REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

Peer reviewed? Yes

Evidence type: Observational; survey data

Subjects: People

Readiness for first sex is about more than age for many young Britons

More nuanced approach needed for interventions around this milestone, say researchers

A substantial proportion of young Britons are not ready for their first sexual activity— whatever their age—and lose their virginity “under circumstances that are incompatible with positive sexual health,” reveals research published online in ***BMJ Sexual & Reproductive Health***.

Rather than focusing on the age at which a young person starts having sex, a much more nuanced approach is needed to this key milestone, say the researchers, in recognition of the fact that “young age alone doesn’t threaten sexual health any more than older age safeguards it.”

The researchers base their findings on information gleaned from responses to the Third National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal-3) for residents of Britain, and carried out in 2010-12.

The analysis was restricted to 2825 sexually experienced 17 to 24-year olds who were asked about their experience of losing their virginity.

The questions aimed to gauge their level of ‘sexual competence,’ defined as consent; autonomy; contraceptive use; and readiness.

So they were asked whether both partners had been equally willing to have sex; whether the decision had been autonomous, and not due to external factors, such as drunkenness or peer pressure; whether they had been ready to start having sex; and if a reliable method of contraception had been used.

Only respondents who answered yes to all four domains were deemed sexually competent.

Background information on deprivation; educational attainment; and contextual factors, such as the nature of the relationship, age of both partners, and the previous sexual experience of the other partner were also explored.

Analysis of the responses showed that nearly four out of 10 women (just under 40%) and around one in four men (26.5%) didn’t feel that their first sexual experience had happened ‘at the right time.’

And almost one in five women said that they and their partner had not been equally willing to have sex on the first encounter, with a similar proportion of women reporting that they had not been in charge of the decision to have sex for the first time.

While most young people used reliable contraception, around one in 10 didn’t.

Over half of all the female respondents (just under 52%) and more than four out of 10 (43.5%) of all the male respondents weren’t deemed sexually competent.

Although increasing age was associated with sexual competence, it didn’t explain all of the variability as sexual competence didn’t come close to zero or 100 per cent at any age. This

suggests that “chronological age may be an overly simplistic indicator of the nature of first intercourse,” explain the researchers.

In line with other published research, partnership stability was associated with a more positive ‘first time,’ while uncertainty about the virginity status of the partner was associated with a lack of sexual competence, possibly reflecting communication issues, say the researchers.

Those of black ethnicity (women) or living in deprived areas (men) were more likely to lack sexual competence, while young women who had discussed sex with their parents or who had received sex education at school were more likely to have been sexually competent when they lost their virginity.

But this wasn’t the case for men, possibly because communication and negotiation skills are less important for men to feel good about their ‘first time,’ suggest the researchers. An alternative interpretation is that school relationships and sex education needs to be more relevant to the needs of young men, they add.

This is an observational study, and as such, can’t establish cause, added to which the associations found may have been due to unmeasured or unknown factors.

But the researchers nevertheless conclude: “A substantial proportion of young people in Britain become sexually active under circumstances that are arguably incompatible with sexual health, defined in its broad sense, encompassing both physical and psychosocial wellbeing.”

And inequalities in sexual health, such as unplanned pregnancies and higher rates of sexually transmitted infections, are evident across certain social/ethnic groups, they add.

“The current findings suggest that these inequalities are also reflected in the nature of first intercourse, indicating that greater efforts are required to reduce the disparities that exist from the very onset of sexual activity,” they write.