

COVID-19-related changes in sexual activity, condomless intercourse, and STI testing among young adults in Australia: a comparison of behaviours reported in two Debrief national surveys.

Adam PCG¹, De Wit JBF^{1,2}, Broady T¹, Treloar C¹

¹ UNSW Sydney, Centre for Social Research in Health, Sydney, Australia, ² Utrecht University, Department of Interdisciplinary Social Science, Utrecht, The Netherlands

Background

- The prevalence of STIs was elevated among young adults in Australia before the COVID-19 pandemic due to a high frequency of condomless intercourse (CI) and suboptimal testing for STIs.
- The extent to which COVID-19 affected young people's sexual health-related behaviours, and the STI epidemic among them, has not been well documented.
- We compared data from the last two Debrief national surveys among young adults to assess changes in sexual activity, condomless intercourse (CI), and STI testing in the first year of the pandemic (2020).

Methods

- Debrief is a repeat cross-sectional survey of sexual health behaviours among youth aged 18-29 years across Australia.
- Participants in the first and second surveys were recruited in early 2018 and early 2021, using social media advertisements.
- 1177 and 2051 respondents, respectively, provided complete data.
- Respondents reported their number and types of sex partners in the 12 months prior to the survey, including those they had CI with. Respondents also indicated whether they had tested for STIs or HIV in the past 12 months.

Data weighting

- Data from each survey were weighted per jurisdiction to reflect the age and gender structure of the Australian population and produce more robust national estimates.

Analyses

- The analyses consisted of a between-survey comparison for each indicator estimate.
- We calculated a percentage of relative increase or decrease in the indicator estimate when a difference was found.

Changes in the number of sex partners

- Increases were observed in the proportions of respondents with no partner in the past 12 months (+17%, from 16.9% in 2018 to 19.8% in 2021) and with only one partner (+53%, from 42.2% in 2018 to 64.4% in 2021). Conversely, the proportion of respondents with two or more partners decreased (-13%, from 41.0% in 2018 to 35.7% in 2021).

Changes in the types of partners

- The proportion of respondents reporting sex with casual partners in the past 12 months declined by 34% (from 41.0% in 2018 to 26.9% in 2021).

Changes in condomless intercourse

- The proportion of respondents who had CI with casual partners in the past 12 months decreased by 31% (from 22.2% in 2018 to 15.3% in 2021).

Changes in testing for STIs

- The proportion of respondents who had tested for STIs in the past 12 months decreased by 23.12% (from 35.9% in 2018 to 27.6% in 2021).

Conclusions

- We observed substantial COVID-19-related reductions among young people in sexual activity and CI, including with casual partners.
- These reductions in 2020 may have compensated for reduced STI testing in preventing STI transmission.
- The dynamic of the STI epidemic after 2020 will depend on the extent of reengagement in sex, STI risk and testing during periods of lifted restrictions.

Poster publication date: 12-08-2022

Contact: Dr Philippe Adam, Centre for Social Research in Health, UNSW Sydney.

Email: philippe.adam@unsw.edu.au

Conflict of interest: NONE

Funding: Australian Government Department of Health