

# ARE SEXUAL HEALTH SERVICES ACCESSIBLE TO YOUNG PEOPLE? A SURVEY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIAN YOUTH TO DETERMINE BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES

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**Background:** The stigma surrounding sexual health can make it difficult for young people to access sexual health care and support. Research surrounding young people's experience with healthcare professionals when seeking sexual health testing, treatment and/or information is limited, particularly in the Western Australian context. This research examines young people's clinical experiences to identify potential barriers to safer sex practices.

**Methods:** An online survey was administered to young people (16-25 years) living in Western Australia. The survey covered 10 domains (e.g. relationships and sexual activity; testing and diagnosis; relationships and sexuality education). Data was analysed by descriptive statistics in SPSS.

**Results:** Data were collected from 916 young people (64% female, 31% male, 5% another gender identity) with diverse sexualities (67% heterosexual, 15% bisexual, 5% homosexual). Overall, 51% of respondents (n=465) had previously sought information, testing or treatment from a healthcare professional (physician, doctor or nurse (90%, n=417)) with the primary reasons for seeking care being sexual health testing (58%, n=270), safer sex practices (e.g. contraception) (44%, n=206) and sexual health information (41%, n=189). Respondents (76%, n=354) were more likely to initiate discussions regarding sexual health than their healthcare professional (21%, n=97). Respondents reported a previous negative experience when asking for sexual health information (22%, n=104), obtaining a sexual health test (13%, n=60) or during STI/HIV treatment (6%, n=28). Many respondents indicated they felt uncomfortable asking questions (18%, n=83) or requesting a test (18%, n=83). Some also felt that healthcare professionals made assumptions about their body or sex life (22.5%, n=105), or did not fully understand their problem (16%, n=76).

**Conclusion:** While many young people report having positive experiences with healthcare professionals when discussing their sexual health, a significant proportion do not. These negative experiences can hinder a young person's confidence, desire and ability to seek sexual health advice, to request a sexual health test and/or access treatment.

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None.

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