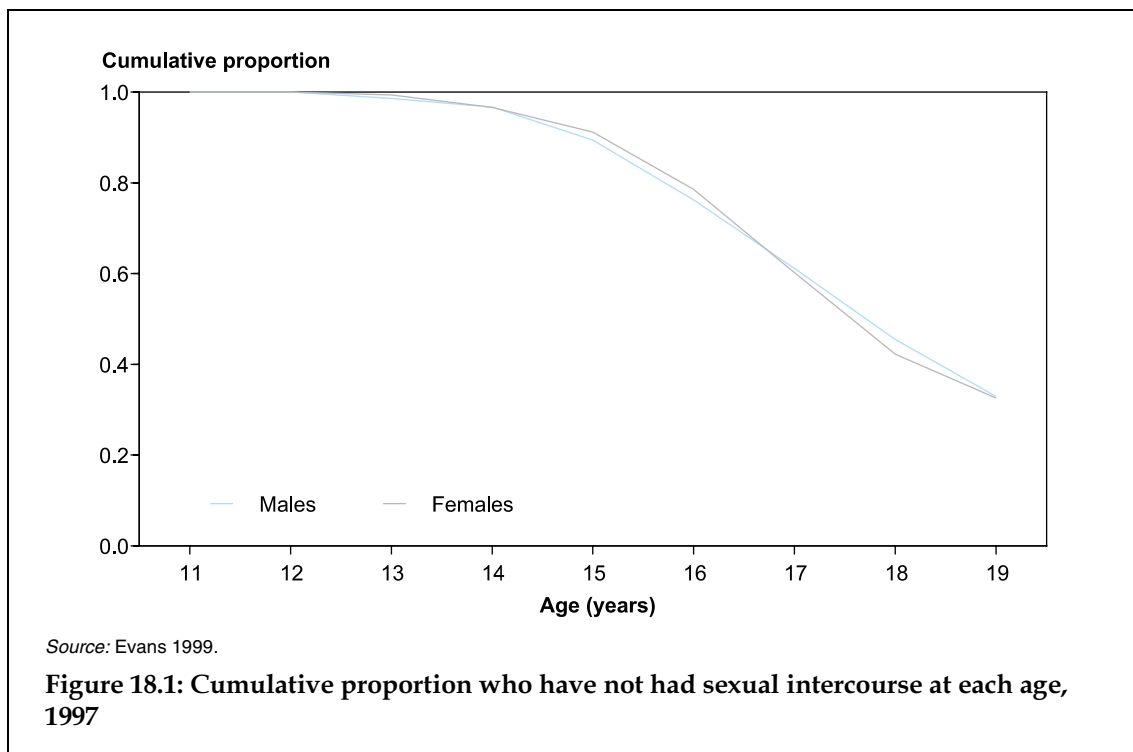


# 18 Sexual behaviour

Reproductive or sexual health issues, such as pregnancy outcomes and incidence of sexually transmissible diseases, were discussed in Chapter 11. This chapter examines the behavioural aspects of sexuality among young people. The topics covered here include sexual activity, use of contraception and sexual attraction.

### Sexual activity

National data on sexual activity are difficult to obtain, although the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has reported the proportions of women at various ages who stated in the 1995 National Health Survey that they were not sexually active (ABS 1998a:11; 1998b:31). The Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society at La Trobe University collected data on sexual activity from a nationally representative survey of students in Years 10 and 12 in 1997 (n = 3,550). This data set has been analysed to produce 'survival curves' indicating the proportions of young people at each age who have not initiated sexual activity (Figure 18.1).



The 'survival curves' may be interpreted as follows:

- In 1997, relatively few young people – 11% of males and 9% of females – had initiated sexual activity before age 15.
- By age 16, the proportions more than doubled, to 24% for males and 21% for females.
- By age 17, about 40% of both males and females had initiated sexual activity.
- By age 18, over half of both sexes, 55% of males and 58% of females, had initiated sexual activity.
- By age 19, over two-thirds of both males and females had initiated sex.

## Use of contraception

Contraception is recognised as a preventive health measure, because it offers protection against unwanted pregnancy. Some forms of contraception, notably the condom, also provide protection from sexually transmissible diseases. In addition, some methods (pill, IUD, sterilisation) require consultation with health professionals, which may then lead to other health issues being considered. The 1995 National Health Survey collected information from women in the age groups most likely to conceive (18–49 years) on their use of contraception and the type they (or their partners, if appropriate) used (Table 18.1).

**Table 18.1: Type of contraception used by women aged 18–49 years, 1995 (per cent)**

Method	Age (years)		
	18–19	20–24	18–49
Contraceptive pill	66.3	71.1	40.0
Condom	32.2	21.6	17.6
IUD	—	2.1	3.0
Periodic abstinence	—	—	3.0
Other temporary method	—	2.6	2.6
Female sterilisation	—	—	19.2
Male sterilisation	—	—	14.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>Number using contraception</i>	<i>111,300</i>	<i>441,100</i>	<i>2,757,900</i>
<i>Users as a proportion of all women</i>	<i>49.7</i>	<i>65.7</i>	<i>66.7</i>

Source: ABS 1998b:31.

- In 1995, two-thirds of all women aged 18–49 years used some type of contraception. Nearly the same proportion (66%) of women aged 20–24 years reported using contraception, as well as half of women aged 18–19 years.
- The type of contraception used was related to age. Younger women relied heavily on the contraceptive pill, whereas older women were more likely to use sterilisation.
- Nearly one-third of those aged 18–19 years and 22% of those aged 20–24 years reported using condoms as their main method of contraception, compared with 18% of all women. The ABS notes that this 'may also be related to the additional function of condoms in controlling the spread of infections, and the emphasis given to this in information campaigns'.

## Sexual behaviour

The La Trobe study of students in Years 10 and 12, noted above, also obtained some information on whether or not the students used a condom when having sex (Table 18.2).

**Table 18.2: Students who report ever having sexual intercourse with or without using a condom, 1992 and 1997 (per cent)**

Sex	Year 10		Year 12	
	1992	1997	1992	1997
<b>Sex without a condom</b>				
Males	12.2	7.4	26.9	26.2
Females	14.1	8.4	35.4	30.8
<b>Sex using a condom</b>				
Males	22.7	20.5	43.1	44.1
Females	16.4	15.1	42.2	45.7

Source: Lindsay et al. 1997:26.

- In general, students of both sexes were more likely than not to use a condom during sexual intercourse. For example, in 1997, 44% of males and 46% of females in Year 12 reported ever having sex using a condom, compared with 26% of males and 31% of females reporting ever having sex without a condom.
- In 1997, the proportions of Year 10 students ever having sex without a condom had decreased to 8% for females and 7% for males, compared with 14% and 27% respectively in 1992.
- The two categories (ever having sex with and without a condom) are not mutually exclusive, thus some students would be in both groups.
- Other information in the La Trobe study indicates that among the sexually active, 'The young women were less likely than young men to report *always* using condoms regardless of whether they had steady or casual partners' (Lindsay et al. 1997:30) (*italics added*).

## Sexual attraction

Sexual attraction or orientation refers to whether a person is attracted to persons of the same sex, the opposite sex, or both. People who are same-sex attracted or attracted to both sexes are considered to be at greater risk of ill-health, particularly HIV/AIDS for men. Because of prevailing social norms, such people (of both sexes) may also be subject to greater risks of being socially ostracised, which can also lead to health problems.

The La Trobe study of Year 10 and Year 12 students asked in 1997 about the students' current feelings of sexual attraction (Table 18.3).

**Table 18.3: Students' current feelings of sexual attraction, 1997 (per cent)**

Sexual attraction	Males		Females	
	Year 10	Year 12	Year 10	Year 12
I am attracted only to people of my own sex	3.4	2.9	2.5	3.7
I am attracted only to people of the opposite sex	93.0	93.6	91.4	89.2
I am attracted to people of both sexes	1.9	2.5	2.8	4.6
Not sure	1.7	1.1	3.4	2.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>Sample size</i>	<i>788</i>	<i>749</i>	<i>962</i>	<i>1,001</i>

Source: Lindsay et al. 1997:28.

- About 93% of males and 90% of females reported that they were attracted only to people of the opposite sex.
- The remainder (7% of males and 10% of females) was divided in fairly equal proportions between being attracted only to people of the same sex, to people of both sexes, or 'not sure'.

## References

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