

Friends, Sex & Benefits

Exploring young adult friendships, relationships and sexually transmissible infections (STI) testing

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- Young adults, aged 18 to 30 years, account for the largest number of new notifications of chlamydia and gonorrhoea annually compared with other age groups in Australia (The Kirby Institute, 2013).
- The **Friends, Sex & Benefits Project (FS&B)** provides a snapshot of the attitudes towards STI testing among socially active, 21 to 30 year old, young adults attending busy, nightlife precincts in Melbourne.
- Young adult friendship networks can be a source of informal sexual health education and support. STI testing in the last 12 months was related to talking to friends and partners about testing.
- To improve testing rates we need to encourage networks that talk about sexual health and understand that each STI test is an opportunity to influence friendship networks.

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WHY ARE YOUNG ADULTS IMPORTANT?

Young adults, aged 18 to 30 years, account for the largest number of new notifications of chlamydia and gonorrhoea annually compared with other age groups in Australia (The Kirby Institute, 2014).

Young adults' lives are often characterised by change and increasing independence, and are influenced by social and cultural circumstances. Consequently, talking about sexual health among young adults is shaped by various factors including education and career demands, family expectations, and the shared values and norms of friendship networks.

Health promotion often operates through these friendships and social networks, where talking about sex and sexual health may be part of everyday conversation (Byron, 2012). This may happen in different ways: sharing stories, giving advice, in-jokes, and discussing the challenges of navigating friendships and relationships.

Increasing STI testing requires a multifaceted approach that attends to the specific needs of different age groups and priority populations. Yet we know little about the specific attitudes and experiences of STI testing for young adults.

The **Friends, Sex & Benefits Project** focused on socially active **21 to 30 year olds**. This group is often absent in literature, as studies most often focus on undergraduate students aged 18 to 21 years and high school students (Hendry, Brown, Johnston, & Dowsett, 2013).

WHAT DID WE DO?

We conducted a survey of socially active young adults aged 21 to 30 years, resident in Australia for three or more years. Our survey comprised five sections: demographics, sexual health attitudes, sexual health knowledge, STI testing experiences, and STI testing perceptions.

A small recruitment team approached participants in busy, nightlife precincts in the Melbourne CBD, on a series of Friday, Saturday and public holiday nights during December 2014 to February 2015.

167 participants completed the survey. The mean age of the sample was 24.8 years.

	21 TO 25 YEARS	26 TO 30 YEARS	TOTAL
Female	57 (57.6%)	31 (45.6%)	88 (52.7%)
Male	39 (39.4%)	37 (54.4%)	76 (45.5%)
Other	3 (3.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (8%)
TOTAL	99 (100%)	68 (100%)	167 (100%)

Most participants (80.2%, n = 134) described their sexuality as straight or heterosexual.

In the 12 months before the survey, just over half the participants (54.5%, n = 91) had two or more sexual partners. There were no significant differences in age between those who reported two or more, and one or no partners.

Over one third of the sample (36.5%, n = 61) tested for STIs 12 months before the survey.

Participants answered a series of questions that allocated partner and friend communication scores. These scores calculated how often they had experienced a number of events related to talking about STI testing with partners and friends. The mean scores are provided in the table on the next page.

While these scores do not provide insight into the young adults' relationships or friendships, or how, when or why they talk about STI testing, they do highlight the relationship between talking to partners and friends and sexual health testing practices.

WHAT DID WE LEARN?

Young adults who talk to their partners about testing are more likely to test

STI testing in the last 12 months was associated with talking to a partner about testing. Almost half of the participants indicated that they talked to a partner or multiple partners about STI testing in the last 12 months (48.5%, n = 81).



Participants who tested for STI in the previous year had higher partner communication scores than those who did not test for STI ($p < .05$). Of those who had not talked to their partners about STI testing (51.5%, $n = 86$ of total sample), most had not had an STI test in the previous 12 months (86.0%, $n = 74$).

COMMUNICATION SCORE	HAD STI TEST		DID NOT TEST		p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Partner	1.52	1.026	.45	.770	.000
Friend/s	1.64	1.065	.69	.898	.000

Talking to friends about testing is associated with testing rates for young adults

More participants talked about STI testing with their friends than with their partners ($p < .05$). Over half of the participants reported that they had spoken to a friend in the last 12 months about STI testing (58.1%, $n = 97$).

Young adults who reported talking to friends, and had higher friend communication scores, were significantly more likely to have tested for STIs in that period (30.5%, $n = 51$ of total sample, $p < .05$).

The more young adults recognise their risk, the more likely they were to test

More than one third (38.9%, $n = 65$) of the participants reported they had felt at risk of acquiring an STI in the last 12 months.

Young adults who had felt at risk of STIs were more likely to talk to their friends and partners about STI testing than those who had not felt at risk of STIs. Participants who felt at risk of STI in the previous year had higher partner and friend communication scores than those who did not feel at risk ($p < .05$).

Feeling at risk of STIs may motivate young adults to test. Most participants who felt at risk of STI in the last 12 months also tested for STIs during the same time period (65.6%, $n = 40$).

COMMUNICATION SCORE	FELT AT RISK		DID NOT FEEL AT RISK		p
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Partner	1.46	1.001	.45	.804	.000
Friend/s	1.48	1.105	.75	.938	.000

Participants with higher numbers of sexual partners were more likely to report that they had felt at risk of STI infection in the past 12 months ($p < .05$). Over half of the participants with two or more partners in the past 12 months felt at risk (57.1%, $n = 52$), compared with 17.1% of participants with 0 or 1 partner ($n = 13$). Those with increased numbers of sexual partners were also more likely to talk to their friends and partners about STI testing, and, importantly, test for STIs in the last 12 months ($p < .05$).

The association between feeling at risk, talking to friends and partners, and STI testing in the last 12 months suggests that young adults may tap into informal networks of sexual health knowledge, experience and support when thinking about testing.

Starting the conversation at the GP or clinic is the first step to encouraging testing for young adults and their friendship networks

Young adults who talk to their friends and partners about STI testing and test for STIs also think that GPs asking them to test or talk about their sexual lives encourages testing. Our survey asked participants to rate health-care, sexual and social scenarios on a scale from 'likely to discourage' to 'likely to encourage' STI testing.

The events most frequently rated to encourage testing included: *If a partner had acquired an STI, If I had sex without a condom, and If my GP asked me if I wanted to test for STIs*. The events most frequently rated to discourage testing were: *If my GP never talked to me about sex and If I didn't know what the tests would involve*.



Our study provides a snapshot of the attitudes and experiences of young socially active adults aged 21 to 30 years, attending busy nightlife precincts in Melbourne. Our findings suggest that we should:

Encourage friendship and social networks to talk about sexual health, support and testing

This study highlights the health promotion opportunities if we are better able to understand the informal experiences of friends in networks who know about STI testing, test regularly, talk to their friends about sexual health and can identify potential risks of STIs in their own lives.

Rethink risk behaviour as an opportunity, not a barrier, for sexual health promotion in friendship networks

Feeling at risk, and increased numbers of sexual partners, may be associated with the promotion of STI testing amongst friends.

Young adults with higher numbers of sexual partners may be a resource for their friendship networks, as they may be a source of informal sexual health education and support for friends.

Understand that each STI test is an opportunity to influence networks

Clinical and health service practices that allow or encourage friends, where appropriate, to test together may act as a catalyst for future sexual health communication and support in those friendship networks.

Building friendship capacity to encourage testing may also be enhanced through programs and policies such as access to home testing kits and patient-delivered partner therapy for chlamydia, which provide occasions for young adults to advocate for testing in their own friendship and sexual networks.

Further research is needed to explore the relationship between friendship, risk and testing, beyond our sample of socially active young adults, to provide further insight into testing motivations and the influence of friendship networks.

GENERAL ENQUIRIES

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