



# Understanding barriers to STI testing among young people

A summary of the online survey 'Getting Down to It'.

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## Background

Young people are at higher risk of contracting sexually transmissible infections (STI). Various barriers continue to prevent young people from testing for STIs. To date, research has focused on assessing the influence of socio-demographic factors, sexual risk taking, STI knowledge and structural barriers such as access to testing facilities.

Individual perceptions and social influences which determine whether or not a young person seeks STI testing have largely been understudied.

A more comprehensive understanding of these factors is needed to inform the development of STI testing campaigns in health promotion programs. The National Centre for HIV Social Research (NCHSR) was commissioned to research potential individual and social determinants which affected the decision to seek STI testing.

## Aim

To address the current gaps in research on the determinants of STI testing in young people.

## Objectives

- To build new evidence on individual and social determinants to testing for STIs
- Assess the extent and contribution of factors that could influence young people's decision to test for STIs
- Prioritise the determinants of testing for STIs that should be addressed by health promotion programs

## Methods

An online cross sectional survey [www.gettingdowntoit.net](http://www.gettingdowntoit.net) was conducted between May and October 2010.

Participants were recruited via a targeted advertisement on Facebook, flyers and the University of NSW's website. To be eligible for the study participants needed to be sexually active males and females aged 16-26 years and living in NSW. They also had to provide informed consent online.

The survey collected the following information: -

- socio-demographic characteristics including age, gender, sexual identity, residence, education and ethnic background
- sexual risk taking behaviours within the last six months
- whether participants had ever experienced STI symptoms
- if they had ever had an STI test, and
- the following potential determinants of STI testing:
  - STI knowledge
  - perceived personal risk of contracting an STI
  - perceived severity of STIs
  - attitudes to STI testing
  - perceived advantages and disadvantages of STI testing
  - fears and concerns related to STI testing
  - shame and embarrassment related to having an STI
  - fear of being judged by others about having contracted an STI
  - perceived support from significant others to have an STI test

## Results

- 2,427 young people accessed the online survey
- 1,658 met the eligibility criteria and
- 1,100 participants provided complete data

## Socio-demographic characteristics

- participants had a mean age of 20.6 years (range 16-26years)
- 60% were female
- 72% identified as being heterosexual
- 38% lived in metropolitan Sydney
- 27% lived in major regional centres
- 28% lived in small cities or towns
- 7% lived in rural or remote areas of NSW
- 21% had a university degree and
- 73 % were from an Anglo-Australian background



### **Sexual risk taking behaviour**

Two thirds of the participants reported having had unprotected sex in the last six months with regular or casual partners. They were two and a half times more likely to have tested for STIs compared with participants who did not report unprotected sex.

Having had unprotected sex was associated with participants who were older, female and/or heterosexual.

### **STI symptoms**

Four out of ten participants reported having ever experienced STI symptoms. Those who experienced symptoms were three times more likely to have been tested for STIs than those who reported they had not experienced STI symptoms.

### **STI testing**

Half of the participants had tested for STIs and/or HIV and two thirds had been tested for both STIs and HIV. Three quarters of their STI tests had been done in the last year. However, few participants indicated that they routinely had an STI test.

### **Potential Determinants of Testing**

#### ***STI knowledge***

Participants' overall STI knowledge was moderate. Knowledge was highest for chlamydia and lowest for gonorrhoea. There were higher levels of STI knowledge among older, female and/or non-heterosexual participants.

However, the contribution of knowledge to the decision to seek STI testing was not significant.

#### ***Perceived personal risk of contracting an STI***

Participants perceived their personal risk of contracting an STI was low. This factor only marginally contributed to the decision to test for STIs.

#### ***Perceived severity of STIs***

There was a high perception amongst participants that STIs are a severe condition. This was especially so for females and heterosexuals. However, this factor did not contribute to the decision to have an STI test.

#### ***Attitudes towards STI testing***

Participants overall had very positive attitudes towards STI testing, particularly non-heterosexual participants. Holding positive attitudes towards testing was found to be associated with ever testing for STIs.

### ***Perceived advantages and disadvantages of STI testing***

There were a number of perceived advantages that participants positively associated with STI testing. These included:

- Feeling more responsible for their own health
- Starting new relationships on the right track
- Being treated and receiving advice if they had an STI

Perceived disadvantages of STI testing were:

- STI testing is expensive
- It is difficult to locate services to access an STI test

These disadvantages were significantly associated with lower levels of STI testing.

### ***Fears and concerns related to STI testing***

All participants had fears and concerns related to STI testing. Those who were younger, female and/or were from a non Anglo-Australian background had higher levels of concern. All the following factors were found to be negatively associated with STI testing:

- Fear of the STI testing procedure
- Concerns regarding parents reactions
- Negative attitudes of staff in testing facilities
- Other privacy and confidentiality concerns

### ***Shame and embarrassment related to contracting an STI and being tested for STIs***

While all participants reported they would feel shame and embarrassment if they had an STI, this had a minimal impact on their decision to have an STI test.

### ***Fear of being judged by others***

The perception that people would be judged negatively by others for having an STI was not associated with the decision to have an STI test.

### ***Perceived support from significant others\* to have an STI test***

Participants generally felt their significant others would be supportive of their decision to testing for STIs. Perceived support from significant others was found to be a key factor that encourages young people to test for STIs.

(\* friends, family and peers)



## Discussion

Many young people in this study reported engaging in unprotected sex. Half of them also reported they had tested for STIs. Young people may rationalise that having unprotected sex is acceptable as long as they have an STI test afterwards. The message that the risk of acquiring an STI from unprotected sex is high, should be reinforced in health promotion messages.

While participants considered STIs to be serious conditions, few considered themselves to be personally at risk. STIs should be made more personally relevant to young people by encouraging them to consider if any of their own behaviours place them at risk of STIs.

STI symptoms prompted these young people to seek STI testing, however many STIs will remain undetected where no symptoms occur. It is therefore important for health promotion campaigns to advocate routine testing for sexually active young people irrespective of symptoms.

While STI knowledge should remain an integral part of STI prevention campaigns, being well informed about STIs was found to impact minimally on a participant's decision to test. This study has found that there are individual and social factors that are more important than knowledge in a young person's decision to test for STIs. Knowledge of STIs should therefore be combined with initiatives which also address the individual and social barriers to testing.

The perception that STI testing is expensive was found to be an important barrier to testing. This can be addressed by providing information on the actual costs involved in an STI test as well as information on bulk billing practices and how to reclaim the cost of health services.

Not knowing where to go to get an STI test was also a barrier. The location of STI testing facilities could also be provided on information flyers, local advertising, clinic websites and social media.

Other important determinants which discouraged STI testing were young people's fears and concerns related to the testing procedure. In order to address such concerns, information about the actual STI testing procedure needs to be provided.

Determinants including being judged by healthcare providers, confidentiality concerns and parents reactions also discouraged STI testing. These may be lessened if health staff are sexual health and youth friendly, non-judgemental and provide assurances about the confidential nature of STI testing and other health consultations.

Shame associated with STIs was found to have less of an impact on the decision to seek testing. Shame around STI testing could be reduced by encouraging young people to view STI testing as an essential and accepted part of routine health maintenance.

A young person's perception that significant others, such as friends, family and peers would support their decision to have an STI was a key facilitator to STI testing. Significant others in a young person's life should therefore be encouraged to actively show support for STI testing.

The value of taking responsibility for one's health should be promoted in STI campaigns, as those who felt responsible for their own health were more likely to have an STI test. Other points to highlight in campaigns include the benefits of treatment and advice when diagnosed with an STI and starting relationships on the right track.

Health care providers can also support young people in taking responsibility for their health. This can be achieved through offering STI testing and sexual health related information as a part of a routine health check up.



A limitation to this study is that survey participants were self selected. Participants who completed the 45 minute questionnaire may be more interested in sexual health than other young people.

Therefore, it is not possible to generalise these results to all sexually active young people in NSW. Population estimates cannot be derived as it is not a prevalence study.

This sample of young people has higher reported rates of testing compared to previous studies. More data is needed to understand whether this is due to recruitment bias or reflects actual STI testing practices.

This study has however provided a comprehensive dataset of the complex individual and social factors which influence a young person's decision to seek STI testing.

It will also inform future discussions on how the determinants and particularly the barriers of STI testing should be addressed in health promotion programs.

Full the full report, *Understanding barriers to STI testing among young people: results from the online survey 'Getting Down To It'*. [Click here.](#)

#### ACTIONS

Following are some suggestions as to how the barriers and facilitators to testing can be addressed by health promotion programs.

- Provide information to young people about the actual cost of having an STI test, including the consultation, testing and treatment costs.
- Provide information where young people can go to have an STI test.
- Provide clear information to address misconceptions around the STI testing procedures.
- Let young people know about the patient privacy and confidentiality policy of GPs and other STI testing facilities.
- Work with doctors and other health care workers to develop sexual health and youth friendly practices.
- Develop clear messages that encourage the friends, peers and parents of young people to actively show support for STI testing.
- Integrate STI testing into the routine health maintenance behaviours of young people and GP consultations.
- Provide clear messages on the benefits of STI testing, e.g. 'Getting tested means you care about your health.' 'Testing is the best way to start a new relationship.' 'It's best to know you have an STI so you can treat it.'
- Develop clear messages that make the risk of contracting STIs personally relevant, e.g. 'By having unprotected sex my risk of contracting an STI is really high.' 'It's what you do, not who you are that puts you at risk of STIs.' 'One or more of your friends could have an STI'.
- Use role models and clear messages to reduce shame and embarrassment about having an STI, e.g. 'Anyone could have an STI.'

#### Information and resources:

**NSW Sexual Health Infoline** 1800 451 624

Free and confidential sexual health support and information for general public and health professionals.

[www.stipu.nsw.gov.au/shil/](http://www.stipu.nsw.gov.au/shil/)

**NSW STI Programs Unit** – resources for health professionals on STIs and STI testing

[www.stipu.nsw.gov.au](http://www.stipu.nsw.gov.au)

**The NSW Centre for the Advancement of Adolescent Health** (NSW CAAH) resources for youth friendly general practices

<http://www.caah.chw.edu.au/resources>