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Coverage
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Theme
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Contraception and sexual health 2002

The most popular method of contraception among women aged under 50 in 2002/03 was the contraceptive pill (used by 25 per cent of women aged 16-49) followed by the male condom (20 per cent), according to a report* published today by the Office for National Statistics. The figures are similar to those seen in each year since 1997-98.

By age, use of the contraceptive pill was highest among women aged 18-29, with over two-fifths of women in these age groups using it. The use of the contraceptive pill among women fell rapidly from the age of 30 onwards to only five per cent of women aged 45-49.

This report presents the results of a survey for the Department of Health on contraception and sexual health carried out in 2002/03 as part of the National Statistics Omnibus Survey. Reports were also published with the results of five earlier surveys conducted in 1997/98, 1998/99, 1999/2000, 2000/01 and 2001/02. This report includes an examination of any significant changes in the data between 2001/02 and 2002/03.

Contraceptive use among women aged under 50

The male condom was most popular among younger women. More than a third of women aged 18-19 and 20-24 were currently using the male condom (38 per cent and 35 per cent respectively).

Just under a quarter (23 per cent) of women aged 16-49 had either been sterilised themselves or their partner had had a vasectomy (11 per cent had been sterilised and 12 per cent of women had a partner who had had a vasectomy).

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Women 'at risk' of pregnancy

Women who are in a heterosexual relationship and who are neither pregnant nor sterilised and do not have a partner who has been sterilised are deemed to be 'at risk' of pregnancy.

The proportion of women 'at risk' of pregnancy has remained stable since 1998/99: in 2002/03, 58 per cent of women were 'at risk' of pregnancy.

- A fifth (21 per cent) of women 'at risk' of pregnancy were aged 30-34 and a further 17 per cent were aged 25-29 and the same proportion (17 per cent) were aged 35-39.
- Of women 'at risk' of pregnancy, 89 per cent were currently using contraception.

Emergency contraception

More than nine in ten (93 per cent) women aged 16-49 had heard of hormonal emergency contraception (the 'morning after pill') and 45 per cent knew of the emergency IUD.

About half (49 per cent) of women who had heard of the 'morning after pill' knew that it is effective up to 72 hours after intercourse; almost all other women thought the effective period was shorter. About one in ten (10 per cent) women who had heard of the emergency IUD knew that it is effective if inserted up to five days after intercourse; again, most other women thought the effective period was shorter although a few incorrectly thought it longer.

During the last year, five per cent of women aged 16-49 had used the 'morning after pill' once, one per cent had used it twice and a further one per cent had used it more than twice.

Women aged under 25 were more likely than women aged 35 and over to have used the 'morning after pill' during the last year.

The most popular source for the 'morning after pill' in 2002/03 remains the woman's own GP or practice nurse (44 per cent). The proportion of women obtaining the 'morning after pill' from a chemist or pharmacy rose from 20 per cent in 2001/02 to 33 per cent in 2002/03, making it the second most popular source.

Over the two years that the 'morning after pill' has been available from a chemist or pharmacy the Survey has found a corresponding fall in the provision from both the woman's own GP or practice nurse and from family planning clinics. In 2001/02, there was a fall in the proportion of women who obtained the 'morning after pill' from their own GP or practice nurse which was mirrored by the proportion of women who had obtained it from a chemist or pharmacy. In 2002/03, however, the increase in the proportion of women obtaining the 'morning after pill' from a chemist or pharmacy mirrored the fall in the proportion of women who had obtained it from a family planning clinic.

Family planning services

The proportion of women visiting family planning services has remained relatively constant since 1997/98: in 2002/03 two-fifths (58 per cent) of women had received advice from a family planning service.

The most popular source of family planning advice was the woman's own GP or practice nurse (82 per cent of women who had visited a family planning service during the last five years had visited their own GP or practice nurse for this purpose although a substantial proportion of these women had also visited a family planning clinic).

Sterilisation and vasectomies

One tenth (11 per cent) of women aged 16-49 had been sterilised and a further three per cent had become sterile as a result of another operation. Almost nineteen out of twenty (94 per cent) women who had been sterilised had had the operation carried out by the NHS.

Eighteen per cent of men aged 16-69 had had a vasectomy and one per cent had become sterile as a result of another operation. Men were much less likely to have had their sterilisation operation carried out by the NHS than women: overall seven in ten (69 per cent) men who had had a vasectomy had the operation carried out by the NHS.

Sexual behaviour

Respondents were asked how many sexual partners they had had in the last year:

- Three-quarters (74 per cent) of men aged 16-69 and four-fifths (80 per cent) of women aged 16-49 had had one sexual partner.
- Eight per cent of men aged 16-69 and 6 per cent of women aged 16-49 had had two or three sexual partners.
- Four per cent of men aged 16-69 and one per cent of women aged 16-49 had had four or more sexual partners.
- Fifteen per cent of men aged 16-69 and 12 per cent of women aged 16-49 had not had a sexual partner.

When men and women of the same age are compared, men were more likely than women to have had multiple partners in the year prior to interview: the largest difference between men and women was found among those aged 20-24 (42 per cent and 20 per cent respectively).

Condom use

People who were either currently in a sexual relationship or had had one in the last year were most likely to have used a condom if:

- They were male: men aged 16-49 were slightly more likely than women of the same age to have used a condom in the last year (51 per cent compared with 47 per cent).
- Young: for both men and women, the use of condoms fell as the age of the respondent increased.
- Had more than one sexual partner: for example, among men aged 16-69, 80 per cent of those who had had more than one sexual partner during the last year had used a condom compared with 32 per cent who had one sexual partner.

Knowledge of sexually transmitted infections

The majority of men and women said that what they had heard about HIV and AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections (STI) had not influenced their sexual behaviour at all (69 per cent of men aged 16-69 and 64 per cent of women aged 16-49).

Around a quarter of men and women said that they now use a condom more often than they used to (24 per cent of men aged 16-69 and 27 per cent of women aged 16-49).

Respondents who had had more than one sexual partner during the last year were more likely to say that their sexual behaviour had been influenced by what they had heard about HIV and AIDS and other STIs than men and women who had one sexual partner.

The proportion of respondents who recognised Chlamydia as a STI continues to rise: in 2002/03 53 per cent of men aged 16-69 and 80 per cent of women aged 16-49 correctly identified Chlamydia as a STI compared with 35 per cent and 65 per cent respectively in 2000/01.

Around four-fifths of men aged 16-69 and women aged 16-49 who recognised Chlamydia as a STI (78 per cent and 82 per cent respectively) knew that Chlamydia can cause infertility and ectopic pregnancy if untreated.

BACKGROUND NOTES

1. The Omnibus Survey is a multi-purpose survey carried out by the ONS each month on behalf of a range of government departments and other public and non-profit making bodies.
2. Details of the policy governing the release of new data are available from the press office.
3. National Statistics are produced to high professional standards set out in the National Statistics Code of Practice. They undergo regular quality assurance reviews to ensure that they meet customer needs. They are produced free from any political interference. © Crown copyright 2003.

