

At least one in ten young people in Britain report a recent distressing sexual problem

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Around one in ten young men and one in eight young women in Britain who are sexually active have experienced a distressing sexual problem lasting at least three months in the past year, according to new research published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*. [1]

The study showed that very few young people experiencing difficulties had sought professional help about their sex lives. The researchers say that failing to address problems in early adulthood could potentially affect sexual happiness and relationships in the future.

The findings come from the third National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal-3) - the largest scientific study of sexual health lifestyles in Britain - carried out by the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, UCL and NatCen Social Research.

'Sexual function' is defined as the extent to which a person is able to participate in and enjoy a sexual relationship. Sexual function problems are often assumed to be more relevant for older people, and the authors believe this is the first study in the UK to focus on sexual function in early adulthood.

The researchers analysed survey data from 1,875 sexually active and 517 sexually inactive participants aged 16 - 21 years old. The survey used items from a specially designed measure of sexual function to ask participants which sexual difficulties lasting three months or more they had experienced in the past year. Other questions included to what extent

these problems had caused participants distress, and if they had sought help or advice about their sex life. [2]

They found that a third of sexually active [young men](#) (34%) and just under a half of sexually active young women (44%) had experienced one or more sexual problems lasting at least three months in the past year. These figures were not much lower than for the wider 16-74 age group, which the team had investigated in a previous study. [3]

Focussing on distress caused, the new research found that around one in ten young men (9%) and one in eight young women (13%) who were sexually active reported at least one sexual problem lasting three months or more in the past year which they had felt distressed about.

Among young women, the most common distressing problems reported were difficulty reaching a climax (6% of sexually active women) and lacking interest in sex (5%). Among young men the most common were reaching a climax too quickly (5% of sexually active men) and difficulty getting and keeping an erection (3%).

Lead author Dr Kirstin Mitchell, who began the research at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine and is now based at the MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit, University of Glasgow, said: "When it comes to young people's sexuality, professional concern is usually focussed on preventing sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancy. However, we should be considering sexual health much more broadly, as sexual difficulties can impact on young people's sexual wellbeing in the longer term.

"Our findings show that distressing sexual problems are not only experienced by older people in Britain - they are in fact relatively common in [early adulthood](#) as well. Sex education and sexual health service professionals need to provide reassurance and opportunities for

young people to discuss and address these problems early on. If we want to improve sexual wellbeing in the UK population, we need to reach people as they start their sex lives, otherwise a lack of knowledge, anxiety or shame might progress into lifelong sexual difficulties that can be damaging to sexual enjoyment and relationships."

Over a third of young people (36% of men and 42% of women) who reported one or more sexual problems had sought help about their sex life, but this was rarely from a professional source. They most commonly reported seeking help from family and friends, or the media and self-help sources including the internet. Only 4% of young men and 8% of [young women](#) who reported a sexual problem had consulted a professional (such as a GP, sexual health professional or psychiatrist) about their sex life in the past year.

Among those young people in the survey who had not had sex in the past year, 10% said they had avoided doing so because of sexual difficulties that either they or their partner had experienced. [4]

Study co-author Professor Kaye Wellings from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, said: "UK sex education is often silent on issues of sexual satisfaction, but these are clearly important to young people and should be addressed. Sex education could do much more to debunk myths about sex, discuss pleasure and promote gender equality in relationships. Teaching [young people](#) the importance of communication and respect within relationships is also key to helping them understand and address problems that may occur in their sex lives."

The authors note that their study may be limited by factors including possible recall bias and underreporting in the self-reported survey responses.

More information: Kirstin R Mitchell, Rebecca Geary, Cynthia

Graham, Soazig Clifton, Catherine H Mercer, Ruth Lewis, Wendy Macdowall, Jessica Datta, Anne M Johnson, Kaye Wellings, Sexual function in 16 to 21 year olds in Britain, *Journal of Adolescent Health*. DOI: [10.1016/j.jadohealth.2016.05.017](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2016.05.017)

Notes:

[1] Of those surveyed, 9.1% of young men and 13.4% of young women who were sexually active reported at least one distressing sexual problem in the past year lasting three months or more.

[2] Sexually active defined as those reporting vaginal, oral or anal sex with at least one partner in the year prior to interview. Sexually inactive defined as those who had previously had a sexual experience but did not report having one in the year prior to interview.

The researchers used the Natsal-SF, a measure of sexual function specifically designed and validated for use in this and other population prevalence surveys. Options for sexual function problems given in survey were: lacked interest in having sex, lacked enjoyment in sex, felt anxious during sex, felt physical pain as a result of sex, no excitement or arousal during sex, difficulty in reaching climax, reached climax too quickly, difficulty getting/keeping an erection (men only), uncomfortably dry vagina during sex (women only).

[3] Mitchell KR, Mercer CH, Ploubidis GB, et al. Sexual function in Britain: Findings from the third national survey of sexual attitudes and lifestyles (Natsal-3). *Lancet* 2013;382:1817e29.

[4] In total 262 men and 255 women had previously had a sexual experience but did not report having sex in the year prior to interview.

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