

ADOLESCENTS' HEALTH KNOWLEDGE AND ATTITUDE TO REPRODUCTIVE AND SEXUAL HEALTH

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ABSTRACT

The demographic status of Bulgarian population is characterized by continuously worsening demographic indicators. On the background of low birth rates Bulgaria takes a leading position of births and abortions per 1000 women aged 15-19. The proportion of extramarital births is increasing. The age limit of sexually transmitted diseases is decreasing. These facts show that it is necessary to increase the level of adolescents' health knowledge concerning the problems of sexual and reproductive health. In 2005 a cross-sectional study among 871 students aged 15 – 18 from 12 schools in the town of Shoumen was carried out with the aim of exploring the health knowledge and attitude of adolescents to contraception and the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS. The respondents are well acquainted with the methods for prevention of unwanted pregnancy, and girls are better informed than boys. Only 3.8% do not know what the methods of contraception are, but 18.9% do not know what the methods for sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS prevention are. The respondents discuss problems concerning sexual behaviour most often with friends and parents. The information related to sexual behaviour the respondents usually receive from friends, the media, books, parents and school. The students prefer to receive information for prevention of unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases by teaching activities carried out by coevals, lectures, video films and brochures.

Keywords: adolescents, reproductive and sexual health, prevention, health knowledge

INTRODUCTION

The demographic status of Bulgarian population is characterized by continuously worsening indicators: increasing death rates, decreasing birth rates, aging of population, negative natural population growth. Compared to the rest of the European countries Bulgaria has the highest negative natural population growth – minus 5.4% for 2005 (4). In the recent years another factor of importance for the process of population decrease and the emerging tendency of depopulation has been the intensive emigration, especially of young people, which on its part results in weakening of the reproductive potential of Bulgarian population. Compared to the low birth rates, the age specific fertility rate of women in the age group 15-19 are high (40,2 per 1000). The proportion of extramarital births is continuously rising. In 2005 the number of extramarital children is 34 858 or 49.0%. The data concerning the fathers of these children has been

collected for about 60.0% of the extramarital births. This fact leads to the conclusion that the extramarital birth rate reflects in great extent the increase of family couples who have not been married before the register (4). Half of the extramarital children have been born by mothers younger than 19 years of age. Despite the current decrease of abortions, they outnumbered births up to the year of 2000, and one tenth of all abortions belong to the group of teenage abortions. Bulgaria takes the third place in Europe with regards to the number of live births and induced abortions per 1000 females aged 15-19 years (8). In the last decade the proportion of teenagers who have had their first sexual intercourse before the age of 16 has tripled. (1,2,3). The prevalence of HIV infection in Bulgaria is still not high but the age of other sexually transmitted diseases is dropping (2). All these facts end naturally in the conclusion that it is quite necessary to increase the level of knowledge of adolescents in the problems of sexual and reproductive health in accordance with international recommendations (9).

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MATERIALS AND METHODS

In 2005 a cross-sectional study was carried out with the aim to explore the level of health knowledge and the attitudes of

adolescents towards contraception and prevention from sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS. The study was carried out with 871 students from 12 schools in the town of Shoumen, in the age of 15 to 18 (11.8% aged 15, 32.3% aged 16, 38.6% aged 17, 17.3% aged 18). The questionnaire consists of 23 questions directed to adolescents' opinion about communication with the opposite sex; their behaviour concerning the beginning of sexual life; their knowledge of the ways for HIV, sexually transmitted diseases, and unwanted pregnancy prevention; the preferred by them forms for acquiring more information on the subject. The questions are with structured answers, and in some of them the respondent may add an answer of his/her own. Several of the questions may be given more than one answer, so that the total sum of percents exceeds 100 %. The questionnaire is individual and guarantees confidentiality. In data processing alternative analysis was used.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results show that the respondents talk about their relations with the opposite sex most frequently with friends (82.1%) and parents (34.1%). Teenagers want to strengthen their individuality and independence and to take their decisions alone, and at the same time they do not want to be different from others and want to be recognized by them. The approval of friends exerts enormous influence on the formation of the outlooks and behaviour of adolescents. This fact explains the finding that teenagers prefer talking on intimate themes with their friends. Girls more frequently share on intimate themes with parents (39.1%) compared to boys (26.8%), and only 3.3% share with a teacher.

In their relations with the opposite sex the adolescents go through new experiences that pose also a number of problems. When in need of advice or help the respondents would turn on the first place to a friend (69.8%), on the second to a parent (36.9%), to a physician (21.9%), to a psychologist (10.8%), to a teacher (2.2%). Girls show greater trust and freedom in the communication with their parents compared to boys: a greater part of girls would turn for advice to a parent (41.1%) in comparison with boys (29.3%). But greater number boys would turn for advice to a physician (23.9%).

Relations in the teen age between the opposite sexes could be not only an expression of love, but also of curiosity, imitation or a desire to be better accepted by friends. The relations (not necessary sexual) are of different duration, usually of several months. The last relationship has lasted from 1 to 3 months among 17.8% of the respondents, 3 to 6 months among 15% of the respondents, 6 to 12 months among 8.6%, more than a year – 16.9%; and 14.6% of the respondents have not had a relation with a representative from the opposite sex. The majority of the respondents (27.1%) have had a relation with duration less than a month, but with the increase in age this percentage decreases (girls: from 25.7% among girls aged 15 decreases

to 17.6% among the girls aged 18; boys: from 39.4% at age 15 to 16% at age 18).

The opinion of respondents concerning the age at which they can start a sexual life differs. 86% of the responding boys and 73.2% of the girls consider that they can have sexual life at their age. Representing the results in age groups we can see that the proportions of those who consider they can lead sexual life increase from 58.6% among girls and 81.8% among boys aged 15 to 100% of the respondents aged 18. An interesting finding is that according to respondents their friends start sexual life most often at the age of 14 – 15 (41.1%) and 16 – 17 (34.7%).

The boys who would share with their parents that they have sexual life are 41.1% and the girls – 34.3%. The first sexual contacts of teenagers require increased responsibility on behalf of them and their parents. More than a half of the respondents talk with their parents about preventing unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.

Having knowledge about the methods of contraception is not only a problem of girls with regards to preventing unwanted pregnancy, but is also a sign of responsible behaviour of boys. The respondents are well informed about contraceptive methods, and girls are better informed than boys. Only 3.8% of respondents do not know what the methods for prevention of unwanted pregnancy are (3.2% from girls and 4.8% from boys). Nevertheless, 71% of respondents think that a girl can get pregnant from the first sexual intercourse, 7.7% - that one cannot, and 21.3% - do not know. A very disturbing fact is that 18.9% of all respondents do not know what the methods for preventing sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS are.

The respondents and their friends most often use for prevention of unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases condoms (58%). Most of the respondents would not feel embarrassed to buy a condom (68.8%), but 18.7% would (23.9% from girls and 9.6% from boys). More than one third consider that the responsibility should be shared: according to 67.3% of respondents both girls and boys are responsible for supplying the condom, according to 27.4% - the boy, and according to 3.2% - the girl.

Only 50.2% of the respondents answer that they would always use a condom (52.1% from girls and 46.8% from boys). Teenagers consider trust in sexual partner very important and accordingly 17.5% of them would not use a condom if they trust their partner.

The use of alcohol and drugs may lead to considerable damages of the growing up organism. Among intravenous drug users the risk of a number of infections including HIV is rising. According to 38.7% of respondents the use of alcohol and drugs predisposes to sexual intercourse, 16.3% do not find such a relation, and the rest do not have an opinion on this question. These results show unsatisfactory level of knowledge among the adolescents.

Respondents usually get information related to sexual life from friends, the media, books, parents and school. The school has an important social role in the formation of knowledge and habits that could be preserved during the whole life. The promotion of sexual and reproductive

health should be integrated in the school programmes (7). Special activities dedicated to sexual and reproductive health have been organized in all 12 schools and 79.4% of the respondents have been present at such activities. Adolescents prefer to receive information for prevention of unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases in teaching activities carried out by coevals, in lectures, video films and brochures.

CONCLUSIONS

- Health education concerning prevention of HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancy should start at the age of 12-13.
- Boys show lower level of knowledge than girls, so there should be paid additional attention to the health education of boys.
- Promotion of healthy reproductive and sexual behaviour should be specifically suitable for that age group (6). The methods of health education should be appropriate to the age of the students, to the characteristics of adolescents' psychology and to the enormous informational pressure from the environment, so that the received knowledge be stable and transformable into adequate health behaviour.
- The preferred by the students methods of health education should be taken into account in the development of preventive programmes. It is necessary to use the potential of the new technologies in promoting sexual health, such as DVDs or CD Roms (5).
- It is necessary to work for improving the health knowledge of parents and their communicative skills.
- Parents, teachers and health professionals should foster relations of mutual trust with adolescents. They should

constantly try with the experience they have and with tact to help young people overcome their inner insecurity, to understand students' needs, to respect confidentiality and adolescents' right of personal life. The care for the sexual and reproductive health of the adolescents is a care of the whole community.

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