SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR AND LACK OF KNOWLEDGE THREATEN HEALTH OF CANADIAN TEENS

New Benchmark Survey Reveals Teens Know Little About STIs And Practice Unsafe Sex

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Montreal, Quebec -- According to a new national survey by the Canadian Association for Adolescent Health (CAAH) and Ipsos, 24 per cent of sexually active Canadian teens between the ages of 14 and 17 did not use any protection against sexually transmitted infections (STIs) the last time they had sex. And 68 per cent have engaged in oral sex, although many are unaware that STIs can be transmitted through this particular sexual activity.

"The goal of this major study was to help the CAAH determine if teenagers need more information on sex and sexual health, to identify exactly what they need, and to find ways to provide this needed information," said Dr. Jean-Yves Frappier, President of the CAAH, paediatrician and Head of the Adolescent Division at Sainte-Justine Hospital in Montreal. "After a first review, it appears that more information needs to be produced and effectively communicated to Canadian teens and their parents."

If you ever wondered what teens are up to, this survey has the answers. For example, Canada's half million sexually active teens between the ages of 14 and 17 have had three sexual partners on average and 38 per cent of them engage in casual sex. Another 16 per cent admit that their partner had other sexual partners while dating them, while half of condom users never check to see if their condoms remain intact.

Yet 90 per cent of Canadian teens claim to be very (19 per cent) or somewhat (71 per cent) knowledgeable about sex and sexual health. Not only does this claim run counter to their actual behaviour, considering the increasing prevalence of STIs, it is also undermined by their widespread lack of knowledge of the most common sexually transmitted infection –

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only 19 per cent have ever heard of HPV, the cause of genital warts and cervical cancer. HIV, on the other hand, is reported most often by teens as a common STI, despite its very low prevalence compared to all the others.

Canadian teens also appear to be unaware of the consequences of STIs. For example, only 20 per cent mention cancer as a possible consequence of HPV and only 37 per cent mention infertility as a possible consequence of chlamydia.

Teens' lack of knowledge about STIs and their consequences is unfortunately exacerbated by the difficulties in obtaining sexual health information. Some 62 per cent said they faced obstacles to getting answers on sexual health, such as their own discomfort in talking about sex. As for sex education in schools, only 23 per cent of teens feel it is very useful.

Vocabulary can be a barrier too. For example, 22 per cent of Canadian teens and 30 per cent of mothers include mutual masturbation in their definition of "sexual intercourse". And when asked to define sexual abstinence, for 26 per cent of teens, it appears that practicing oral sex is compatible with abstinence. These differences in interpretation might prevent some teenagers from getting the sex information they need.

Parents will be surprised to learn that THEY are in fact the real teen role models when it comes to sex, not movie, music, sport and TV stars. Parents are also considered a major source of information on sex and sexual health by their teenagers (63 per cent) and nearly half (43 per cent) consider their parents to be the most useful and valuable source of information. Unfortunately, 38 per cent of teens have not discussed sex and sexuality with their mothers.

"One of the most surprising results of the study was how parents underestimate their importance and the role teens expect them to play when it comes to their sexuality and sexual health," said Dr. Miriam Kaufman, a CAAH spokesperson and paediatrician at the

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Adolescent Division at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto. "Canadian teens look up to their parents and consider them a valuable source of information. We are hoping that by making this information widely known, parents will feel more comfortable breaking the wall of silence that too often exists when it comes to discussing sexuality with their children."

The results of the survey, completed in October 2005, are based on 1,171 online interviews conducted nationally with teenagers between the ages of 14 and 17, and 1,139 online interviews with mothers of teenagers between the ages of 14 and 17. The sample was generated by Ipsos-Reid's Canadian Consumer Online Panel. The Panel is composed of 150,000 randomly selected households, representing a microcosm of Canada's Internet population. With sample sizes of 1,139 and 1,171, the results are considered accurate to within ±2.9 percentage points, 19 times out of 20, of what they would have been had the entire 14-17 teenage population been polled. The margin of error will be larger within regions and for other sub-groupings of the survey population. These data were weighted to ensure the sample's regional and age/sex composition reflects that of the actual Canadian 14-17 teenage population according to Census data.

The survey of Canadian teens and mothers was conducted on behalf of the Canadian Association of Adolescent Health by Ipsos and supported by Merck Frosst Canada Ltd.

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