

AUSTRALIAN ADOLESCENT'S HIV KNOWLEDGE, PERCEPTIONS AND BEHAVIOUR: TRENDS ACROSS FIVE WAVES OF THE AUSTRALIAN SURVEY OF SECONDARY STUDENTS AND SEXUAL HEALTH

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Background: Since 1992, Australia has conducted a national survey of adolescent sexual health approximately every five years. The first survey was initiated amid concerns about the vulnerability of young people to HIV. Since then, the survey has provided an overview of sexual health trends of young people.

Methods: The study contained five waves (1992 Wave N=572, 1997 Wave N=3550, 2002 Wave N= 2388, 2007 Wave N=2926, 2013 Wave N=2136). Data, predominantly collected in-school, were examined across waves and by year in school (Year 10 and 12) and gender (female and male). Descriptive statistics from items on HIV and STI knowledge, risk perceptions, and sexual behaviour items were compared across all five waves of data to identify long-term cross-cohort trends.

Results: Overall trends indicated no substantial changes between waves. HIV knowledge was relatively stable and high (~80-100% correct answers) with the exception of a ~25% drop in knowledge regarding a false statement on mosquito transmission. STI knowledge was stable, with moderate scores (~60-70% correct answers) with the exception of a ~45% increase in knowledge that chlamydia does not only affect women. Perceptions of personal HIV and STI risk was consistently low at ~5-10%. Sexual behaviours demonstrated consistency across cohorts; ever had sex/sexual intercourse (~20-25% for Year 10, ~50% for Year 12), condom use (~60-80%), number of partners (~1). Adolescents consistently endorsed positive associations with last sexual encounters (~50-60%) and had low negative experiences (~10%).

Conclusion: Australian adolescents maintained consistency in HIV knowledge, risk perceptions, and level and satisfaction in sexual behaviours. Similar to other Western cultures, Australia has seen concentrated efforts to address adolescent sexual health which may have impacted changes in knowledge on specific issues. Stability across waves suggests modern adolescent HIV knowledge, risk perceptions and behaviours have plateaued and may require significant efforts to shift.

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