

SPEAKING SAFER SEX: EXPLORING HOW YOUNG AUSTRALIAN MEN NEGOTIATE CONDOM USE

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Background: Australian young adults aged 18-26 are most at risk of contracting an STI. Despite targeted health campaigns, condom use remains inconsistent. Safer sex communication such as discussing condom use, sexual history and STI testing is an important aspect of sexual relationships. The aim of this study was to investigate the relationship between safer sex communication and condom use amongst young men in Australia.

Methods: Twelve young men participated. All participants were male, heterosexual, single, lived in New South Wales, Australian and between the ages of 18-26. A phenomenological approach was chosen to guide this study to investigate the relationship between safer sex communication and condom use. Semi structured interviews were used to obtain information, and thematic analysis was utilised to identify 4 key themes in the data.

Results: Four themes were identified: talking about safe sex isn't sexy; intentions do not necessarily predict use; knowledge and experience mitigates condom use efficacy; and decisions based on assumed partner sexual safety. This study emphasized inconsistencies between attitudes about condoms, experiences of safer sex communication and actual condom use. General attitudes on condoms were unanimously positive, whereas engaging a sexual partner in discussion on condoms was experienced as uncomfortable. Young men negotiated condom use with partners through strategies of humour, subtlety, directness or avoidance depending on their individual levels of motivation to use. Intentions to use condoms were motivated according to the individual's circumstances and experiences. Factors influencing safer sex communication included assumptions about a partner's sexual safety, level of knowledge and experience of social scripts.

Conclusion: This study recommended that sexuality education programs, public health campaigns and media organizations focus on normalising safer sex communication, empowering young people to become informed and celebrating their intentions to be sexually safe. Future research should continue investigating the social aspects of safer sex.

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