



## SEXUAL PROFILE OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

### *Perfil sexual de estudantes universitários*

### *Perfil sexual de estudiantes universitarios*

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#### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To investigate the sexual profile of university students. **Methods:** Descriptive, exploratory and quantitative study, carried out between April and June 2015 at a University of the municipality of Balneário Camboriú, Santa Catarina, Brazil. The data collection instrument was a self-administered, closed questionnaire with 31 multiple-choice questions, related to the participants' sociodemographic profile, sexual life and knowledge of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), condoms and contraceptive methods. The sample comprised 371 university students. The information was electronically tabulated, and the analysis of simple frequency and percentage distribution was performed based on the number of responses obtained. **Results:** Of the 371 university students who composed the sample, 237 (63.9%) are women in the predominant age range between 21-25 years, predominantly heterosexual, attending Law, with Catholic religion, with the South region as place of origin, and living with relatives. The results indicated that 137 respondent students are condom users (36.9%), although a large number believe that there are other preventive methods to STDs/HIV/AIDS besides female and male condoms, such as: the contraceptive pill (88; 23.7%), vasectomy (48; 12.9%) and tubal ligation (42; 11.3%). **Conclusion:** The sexual profile of the university students assessed is vulnerable, since there is disinformation about the themes that permeate the human sexuality, which gives rise to health risks.

**Descriptors:** Sexual Behavior; Sexually Transmitted Diseases; Students; Disease Prevention.

#### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** Investigar o perfil sexual de estudantes universitários. **Métodos:** Estudo descritivo, exploratório e quantitativo, realizado entre abril e junho de 2015, em uma universidade do município de Balneário Camboriú, Santa Catarina. O instrumento de coleta de dados foi um questionário auto-aplicável fechado, com 31 questões de múltipla escolha relacionadas ao perfil sociodemográfico, vida sexual e conhecimentos dos participantes sobre doenças sexualmente transmissíveis (DST), preservativos e métodos contraceptivos. A amostra contou com 371 universitários. As informações foram tabuladas eletronicamente, realizando-se a análise de distribuição de frequência simples e porcentagem com base no número de respostas obtidas. **Resultados:** Dos 371 estudantes universitários que compuseram a amostra, 237(63,9%) são mulheres com faixa etária predominante entre 21-25 anos, predominantemente heterossexual, cursando Direito, de religião católica, tendo por local de origem a região Sul e residindo com familiares. Os resultados indicaram que 137(36,9%) estudantes respondentes fazem uso do preservativo, porém um número grande acredita que há outros métodos preventivos à DST/HIV/AIDS além do preservativo feminino e masculino, tais como: pílula anticoncepcional (88; 23,7%), vasectomia (48; 12,9%) e laqueadura (42; 11,3%). **Conclusão:** O perfil sexual dos estudantes universitários investigados é vulnerável, pois há desinformação acerca das temáticas que atravessam a sexualidade humana, o que gera riscos à saúde.

**Descritores:** Comportamento Sexual; Doenças Sexualmente Transmissíveis; Estudantes; Prevenção de Doenças.



## RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** Investigar el perfil sexual de estudiantes universitarios. **Métodos:** Estudio descriptivo, exploratorio y cuantitativo realizado entre abril y junio de 2015 en una universidad del municipio de Balneário Camboriú, Santa Catarina, Brasil. El instrumento de recogida de datos fue un cuestionario auto aplicable con preguntas cerradas, 31 preguntas de opción múltiple relacionadas al perfil sociodemográfico, la vida sexual y los conocimientos de los participantes sobre las enfermedades de transmisión sexual (ETS), el condón y los métodos anticonceptivos. La muestra fue de 371 universitarios. Las informaciones fueron tabuladas electrónicamente realizándose un análisis de distribución de frecuencia simple y porcentaje basado en el número de respuestas obtenidas. **Resultados:** La muestra fue de 371 estudiantes universitarios. De ellos, 237 (63,9%) son mujeres en la franja de edad predominante entre los 21-25 años, la mayoría heterosexual, estudiando en la facultad de Derecho, de religión católica, de origen de la región Sul del país y que viven con sus familiares. Los resultados indicaron que 137 (36,9%) estudiantes utilizan el condón pero un gran número de ellos cree que hay otros métodos de prevención de las ETS/HIV/AIDS además del preservativo femenino y masculino tales como la pildora anticonceptiva (88; 23,7%), la vasectomía (48; 12,9%) y la ligadura de trompas (42; 11,3%). **Conclusión:** El perfil sexual de los estudiantes universitarios investigados es vulnerable pues hay desinformación sobre las temáticas de la sexualidad humana lo que genera riesgo para la salud.

**Descriptor:** Conducta Sexual; Enfermedades de Transmisión Sexual; Estudiantes; Prevención de Enfermedades.

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## INTRODUCTION

Sexuality is a set of characteristics that translates into the most varied forms of expressing the vital energy, which is the energy manifested through the ability to connect with people, pleasure, desires and necessities of life<sup>(1)</sup>.

Sexuality involves various dimensions of human life, such as gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, emotion, love, and reproduction. It is expressed and lived by each person in a different way - through thoughts, desires, fantasies, values, attitudes, roles, relationships, among others - and is related to the social context of desires, beliefs, representations, values, behaviors, relationships and identity, being developed and reformulated over time. Therefore, sexuality is a distinct concept of sex, which refers to the biological issue oriented to the female and male reproductive system<sup>(2,3)</sup>.

There is the performance of new social roles in youth. Changes in the relationship with the family, in search for greater autonomy and greater freedom for decision-making, factors that directly influence the social group's experience with their sexuality and make them vulnerable as to risk exposure<sup>(4)</sup>.

Young people live their sexuality as a field of discovery, freedom and building of their capacity for decision-making, responsibility, choices and affirmation of identity. It is a way of seeking autonomy, living in a unique way and with characteristics of youth itself<sup>(3)</sup>.

Thus, the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases is linked to two concepts: first, the concept of risk, which describes people or groups of people in situations where some health damage (infection or illness) may occur; second, the vulnerability, which is defined as biological, epidemiological, social, cultural, economic and political factors that can increase or reduce the risk posed to an individual or groups of individuals<sup>(4)</sup>.

The vulnerability presents three dimensions, which would be: individual, when the individual puts himself in situations that can harm his health, such as not using a condom during sex; the social dimension, consisting of situations related to social, economic and political aspects and lack of opportunities, which may indicate greater exposure to risk situations; and finally, the institutional dimension, which is defined as the lack of public policies or their ineffectiveness in the face of an epidemic or an aggravated situation<sup>(4)</sup>. The importance of preventive work seeks the reduction of risks and the understanding of vulnerabilities.

The literature points that having information about sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) does not necessarily result in a safe sexual practice, demonstrating that behavior and knowledge are not congruent. The risk behavior appears to the extent that the subjects stop using condoms with stable and casual partners, and one reason for that is the belief that fidelity and relationship time make sex safe<sup>(5)</sup>. Monogamy in a stable relationship appears as a rule, and fidelity is a preponderant element<sup>(6)</sup>. Thus, relationships that are not stable and sporadic require caution regarding prevention, while stable relationships and with acquaintances justify the non-use of condoms<sup>(7)</sup>. In the social imaginary, the person who will transmit HIV to you is unknown; so that, knowing the person and having a stable relationship, render you immune to risks, a belief based on the fidelity of the couple<sup>(6)</sup>.

Because of the feminization and heterosexualization of AIDS, it is believed that government authorities should develop educational projects that are not aimed at informing the correct use of condoms, but rather at raising public awareness of sexually-safe practices, both in stable relationships and in sporadic relations, as well as clarifying the mutual responsibility between the couple towards safe sex<sup>(8,9)</sup>. For women, empowerment should be encouraged, improving their sexuality in a way that they are protagonist, regardless of the type of relationship<sup>(10)</sup>.

The Counseling and Testing Centers (CTC) are health services that carry out STD diagnostic and prevention actions and have contributed to the accomplishment of care in the area. These are services recognized by the community in general and by health agents, essential for providing quality counseling, facilitated access to HIV, syphilis and viral hepatitis rapid tests for free, in a confidential manner and with reliability in the result<sup>(11)</sup>.

The CTC of the municipality of Balneário Camboriú, in Santa Catarina, develops some health promotion and prevention projects for the community, which are carried out inside and outside the health unit. One of them is Educa Vida, a partnership between the Health Secretariat and the Education Secretariat aimed at preventing STD/HIV/AIDS, hepatitis and undue use of drugs in public and private schools, encompassing primary and secondary school and youth and adult education (EJA); there is also the project Learning, which is intended for preventive actions with young university students, university teachers and employees. According to the Epidemiological Bulletin on HIV/AIDS<sup>(12)</sup>, the number of AIDS cases in the 20-29 years age group of is 9,544 in Brazil, being the largest number in comparison with other age groups.

In this context, it is proposed, in the present study, to investigate the sexual profile of that age group, which is in greater numbers in the university, with the purpose of contributing with subsidies for the planning of prevention actions by the CTC. It is intended to obtain more specific information about risk and protection behaviors, sexual practices of the university students, and situations of vulnerability to which this public is subject. Therefore, investigating the sexual profile of university students was established as the objective of this research.

## METHODS

This research is characterized as an experimental, descriptive and cross-sectional study conducted with primary data. The population was composed of 3,000 students from a university in the city of Balneário Camboriú, Santa Catarina, Brazil, of which 371 accepted to take part in the research. The study used the simple sample calculation, carried out online<sup>(13)</sup>, with a confidence level of 95% and a sampling error of 5%.

The data were collected by means of a self-administered structured questionnaire with 31 questions related to the sociodemographic and sexual profile of the students, investigating which information they had about STD/HIV/AIDS prevention, and whether they used some preventive method. The road map for collecting data was based on the Patient Care Form of the CTC System of Information (*SI-CTA*)<sup>(14)</sup>, adapted according to the objectives of this research.

The questionnaire was made available via institutional email, so that the 3,000 university students responded online, remaining available for answers in the period from April to June 2016, resulting, at the end of that period, in 371 responses composing the sample. The inclusion criteria for participation in the research were: to be over 18 years of age and to be a university student. The exclusion criterion considered the questionnaires that were not fully answered.

For data analysis, descriptive statistics were used from the distribution of the simple frequency and presentation of absolute and relative numbers. The research project was approved by the Ethics Research Committee of the University of Vale do Itajaí, by means of consolidated Approval No. 1 235 127.

## RESULTS

We present the findings of the responses of the 371 university students who accepted to take part in the research. Of these, 237 (63.9%) participants were women and 150 (40.4%) were in the age group between 21-25 years, predominant in the research. Of the total sample, 307 (82.7%) declared themselves as heterosexuals, 227 (61.2%) attending Law School, 161 (43.4%) of the Catholic religion, 330 (88.94%) with the South region as place of origin, and 246 (66.3%) living with relatives (Table I).

Table I - Frequency distribution of the sociodemographic data of the participants. Balneário Camboriú, Santa Catarina, Brazil. 2016.

<b>Sociodemographic data</b>	<b>Female n=237(63,%)</b>	<b>Male n=134(36,1%)</b>	<b>Percentage of the sample</b>
<b>Age</b>			
Up to 20 years	72	38	29.6%
21-25	95	55	40.4%
26-30	40	23	17%
31-35	14	7	5.7%
36-40	7	6	3.5%
Over 40 years	9	5	3.8%
<b>Sexual orientation</b>			
Heterossexual	217	90	82.7%
Homossexual	8	37	12.1%
Bissexual	9	6	4%
Others	3	1	1.1%
<b>Course</b>			
Management	24	9	8.9%
Architecture and urbanism	0	2	0.5%
Design	1	0	0.3%
Interior design	0	1	0.3%
Games & Entertainment Design	1	0	0.3%
Law	144	83	61.2%
Aesthetics	13	1	3.8%
Gastronomy	13	13	7%
Human Resource Management	16	3	5.1%
Marketing	8	3	3%
International relations	14	15	7.8%
Tourism and Hospitality	3	4	1.9%
<b>Religion</b>			
Catholic	110	51	43.4%
Evangelical	48	21	18.6%
Spiritist	22	4	7%
Umbanda	3	3	1.6%
Mormon	2	0	0.5%
Adventist	2	2	1.1%
Atheist	6	14	5.4%
Without religion	37	35	19.4%
Others	7	4	3%
<b>Place of origin</b>			
South region	207	123	88.94%
Central-West region	9	1	2.42%
Southeast region	17	5	5.92%
North region	1	4	1.35%
Northeast region	3	1	1.35%
<b>Resides with</b>			
Relatives	165	83	66.83%
Friends	7	8	4.05%
Partner	46	15	16.44%
Alone	19	28	12.67%
Others	0	0	0%

Regarding the participants' knowledge of STD/HIV preventive methods, 369 (99.5%) reported knowing them. Only 2 participants (0.5%) said they did not know them. The male/female condom was the predominant response for 368 (99.2%) students, followed by the contraceptive pill, indicated by 88 (23.7%); vasectomy (48; 12.9%); tubal ligation (42; 11.3%); diaphragm (32; 8.6%); calendar method (28; 7.5%); spermicide (14; 3.8%); cinnamon tea (7; 1.9%); other methods (4; 1%), cervical mucus (3; 0.8%); basal temperature (2; 0.5%) and rue tea (1; 0.3%).

Regarding the birth control methods, 368 (99.2%) reported knowing them, and only 3 (0.8%) do not know them. Among the methods cited, the contraceptive pill (361-97.3%) had a higher prevalence, followed by male/female condom (355; 95.7%), vasectomy (244; 65.8%), tubal ligation (237; 63.9%), diaphragm (129; 34.8%), calendar method (117; 31.5%), spermicide (65; 17.5%), cinnamon tea (11; 3%), other methods (10; 2.7%), basal temperature (9; 2.4%), rue tea (4; 1.1%) and cervical mucus (3; 0.8%).

The most prevalent modes of transmission pointed by the participants were: vaginal sex (361; 97.3%) and anal sex (332; 89.5%), syringe use (329; 88.7%) and unsterilized blood donation (327; 88.1%), followed by the use of non-sterile sharps (294; 79.2%), oral sex (273; 73.6%), vertical transmission (254; 68.5%), breast milk (107; 28.8%), mutual masturbation (61; 16.4%), kiss on lips (36; 9.7%), sweat, saliva and tears (34; 9.2%), shared use of glasses, cutlery and dishes (20; 5.4%), soap, towel and toilet (19; 5.1%), insect bite (13; 3.5%), others (2; 0.5%) and, finally, hug (1; 0.3%).

In regard to sexual practices, 197 (53.9%) participants had the first intercourse between 16-20 years, 135 (36.38%) participants stated that the age was 10-15 years, 16 (4.31%) answered 21-25 years, 15 (4.04%) had never had sexual intercourse, 3 (0.8%) were less than 10 years old, 3 (0.8%) did not respond or could not remember, and 2 (0.53%) answered 26-30 years.

In relation to the stability of relationships, 254 (68.5%) participants have stable partners and 117 (31.5%) did not have stable sexual partners. As to the predominant types of sexual partners, 259 (69.8%) answered male, 104 (28%) female, 17 (4.6%) had never had sexual intercourse, and 2 (0.5%) answered transvestite/transsexual.

With respect to the predominant number of sexual partners, 291 (78.44%) participants reported between 1-5 partners, 34 (9.16%) indicated between 6-10, 17 (4.58%) answered that they had not had sex partners within the last 12 months, 11 (2.96%) reported more than 15, 10 (2.69%) said they could not remember or did not respond, and 8 (2.15%) students answered 11-15.

On the use of condoms in sexual relations, there was a predominance of participants who used it (137; 36.9%), followed by 135 (36.4%) who reported using it at times, 84 (22.6%) said they did not and 15 (4%) participants never had sexual intercourse.

Among the reasons for not using condom with occasional and stable partners, trusting the partner (221; 59%) stands out, followed by: dislike (111; 29.9%), believing that the other does not carry a STD/HIV infection (71; 19.1%), that one will not catch the disease (65; 17.5%), not having time enough (63; 17%), any other reason (60; 16.2%), desire to have children (38; 10.2%), the partner does not accept it (27; 7.3%), not being able to negotiate (13; 3.5%), disbelief in its effectiveness (4; 1.1%), not knowing how to put it on (2; 0.5%), lacking information (1; 0.3%), and not affording to buy it (1; 0.3%).

As to the importance of discussing the topic, 345 (93%) believe that promoting the discussion within the university is relevant. There was a predominance of those who believe that there is no discussion about sexuality at the university, with 251 (67.7%) responses against 120 (32.3%) who believe that the topic is discussed. Those who believe that discussions take place at the university by means of lectures were a majority, with 173 (46.6%) answers, followed by 149 (40.2%) who pointed class discussions, but there were also 116 (31.3%) who stated that discussions are held in other ways, 44 (11.9%) believe they occur by means of a course, 40 (10.8%) by debating a film and 35 (9.4%) by means of a workshop.

As for the space where they talk about sexuality, the students who talk at home were a majority, with 240 (64.7%) answers, followed by those who talk at the university, with 209 (56.3%); at the bar, with 169 (45.6%); at work, with 128 (34.5%); on the internet, with 119 (32.1%); and at the church, with 29 (7.8%); a further 25 (6.7%) students stated that they do not talk about it, and 20 (5.4%) answered that they talk about sexuality in other unspecified places.

In relation to the most effective ways to convey information about sexuality and prevention, 289 (77.9%) believe it is the television, 281 (7.7%) cite Facebook, and 276 (74.4%) group talk/lecture. Following that, 199 (53.6%) pointed You Tube, newspaper (154; 41.5%), course (148; 39.9%), folder (140; 37.7%), radio (137; 36.9%), Twitter (127; 34.2%), books (101; 27.2%), and other unspecified ways (20; 5.4%).

## DISCUSSION

The results of the present study regarding the age of sexual initiation of the university students corroborate the research that analyzed the university community's knowledge, attitudes and behaviors related to STI (sexually transmitted infection), evidencing a higher frequency in the 16-19 years age group, the mean age for the participants' first intercourse (16 years for men and 19 years for women)<sup>(5)</sup>. Another study, which aimed to analyze the associations between sexual attitudes, contraceptive attitudes, the locus of health control and the self-esteem in students of a private higher education institution, through a semi-structured questionnaire applied with 152 students, also obtained 17 years as the mean age of the first sexual intercourse<sup>(15)</sup>.

About the number of sexual partners within the last 12 months, there was a prevalence of 1-5 partnerships among the participants of the present study, with 291 responses (78.44%), which validates the results of the research that aimed to describe

the sexual profile of students of health sciences programs of the Federal University of Ceará by applying a closed questionnaire, which evidenced that, among the 303 participants of the study, 201 were sexually related to a number of partners between 1-6<sup>(16)</sup>. Another study that aimed to identify and compare aspects of the individual vulnerability to STD/AIDS among university students of the first and last years of Nursing and Medicine programs, by means of a questionnaire applied to 263 students, found a number of 0-6 sexual partners within the last twelve months, a result that is similar to that of the present study<sup>(17)</sup>.

About the number of sexual partners within the last 12 months, the findings of the current research corroborate the research that had the prevalence of participants who had a stable partner<sup>(16)</sup>.

In relation to the use of condoms in sexual intercourses, the data of the present study are similar to those found in the research that investigated the behavior of 382 university students aged 20-29 years, among whom 119 had used condoms in all sexual intercourses within the last 30 days, followed by 103 who sometimes used them and 50 who never did so. The data collected in the current investigation present a limitation related to the fact that the use of condoms can vary according to the type of sexual relation (oral, vaginal and anal) and this variable was not addressed in the questionnaire<sup>(18)</sup>.

In a study whose main objective was to analyze vulnerabilities related to sexual transmission of HIV among university students through a semi-structured questionnaire applied to 161 students, the results demonstrated that, among the 102 students who were sexually active, 34 (33.3%) reported using condoms at all times, followed by 33 (32.2%) who reported sometimes using them, and 24 (23.5%) who said they rarely used condoms. Such results, when proportionally compared to the present study, obtained similar responses<sup>(19)</sup>.

The most cited reason among the university students in the current study for non-use of condoms was confidence in the partner, a finding that supports a study with university students of São Paulo, Brazil, that demonstrated that condom use is replaced by the use of contraceptive pills in stable relationships, where it is believed that there is greater confidence in the partner<sup>(20)</sup>. Such results demonstrate that the levels of education and knowledge of the research participants can not be associated with the use of preventive methods<sup>(16)</sup>.

With regard to the university students' knowledge of STD/HIV/AIDS preventive methods, the findings of the present research reinforce the results found in a study in the interior of São Paulo, which was intended to raise the level of information on STD/AIDS and hepatitis B and C among 863 university students. By using a closed questionnaire, it pointed out that more than 95% of the participants cited female and male condoms as safe measures for prevention of sexually transmitted diseases. However, it differs as to whether other contraceptive methods are also believed to prevent STD/HIV/AIDS, only 1.8% of the respondents believe that there is other method to prevent STD/HIV/AIDS besides the condom use<sup>(21)</sup>.

In the present study, when the university students' knowledge of contraceptive methods was verified, a misunderstanding of the difference between STD/HIV/AIDS prevention and pregnancy prevention was observed, since the same methods were cited in both questions and obtained a higher rate of responses.

Data on the transmission of STD/HIV/AIDS show that, for the most part, the university students have an adequate knowledge of the subject, but 36 individuals believe that STD/HIV/AIDS can be transmitted through kissing on the lips; sweat, saliva and tears; and use of cutlery, dishes and glasses. There is a similarity in the data obtained in a research that was aimed at evaluating the knowledge, attitudes and perception of AIDS risk among students of the Speech Therapy program of a private university in the city of Campo Grande, Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil, by applying a closed questionnaire to 137 university students. The research showed beliefs that donating blood, kissing on the lips and having contact with a tear of someone with HIV are modes of transmitting the virus, as well as sharing dishes, forks and glasses, demonstrating that common-sense knowledge about the modes of transmission is significantly present in the responses of both studies<sup>(22)</sup>.

In an analysis of 1,819 university students of different areas of knowledge, based on an electronically sent questionnaire, which sought to quantify and generate self-perception of the (lack of) knowledge of STDs, besides evaluating the interest in a course addressing that theme, it was found that almost half of the students believe that it is important that a compulsory course in that theme be available to all areas of knowledge<sup>(23)</sup>. Thus, in both studies, one can verify the university students' interest in the theme and perception of its importance, regardless of the area of knowledge.

The present study does not corroborate the findings of a research, since the means that contributed to the knowledge of STD/AIDS and hepatitis B and C were printed materials, followed by the television, whereas new Technologies, such as the internet, appeared less<sup>(21)</sup>.

From the results it can be seen that the level of education does not imply knowing the modes of transmission of sexual diseases, nor making use of the condom, although a majority affirm to use it. Confidence in the partner was a reason for non-use of the condom, demonstrating that a loving relationship can be considered a vulnerability factor for STD/HIV/AIDS infection, since condoms are currently the only preventive method. However, despite being seen as a vulnerability factor, this is not considered determinant. The students showed interest in discussing sexuality-related issues within the university and also demonstrated understanding their importance.

From the analysis of the results, aspects of the life and sexual behavior of the students were verified, which can be summed up in the disinformation about the themes that perpass the human sexuality, which poses risks to health. The respondents, when asked about the contraceptive and preventive methods they knew, pointed out the same methods for both questions. Thus, one

realizes that there is fragility concerning the theme, as erroneous information and concepts. Moreover, the fact that the students know the methods does not imply making use of them, knowing how to use them, or their purpose.

The proposed objectives were reached within the limitations that the format of the research was proposed, as it presents a quantitative character and for this reason prevents the use of open questions for a deepening of the investigated questions. It is suggested that further qualitative investigations be carried out within this theme, so that the reasons for non-use of condoms can be assessed in greater depth.

## CONCLUSION

The university students investigated presented a vulnerable sexual profile, since most of them have doubts or erroneous knowledge and conclusions about various aspects related to the human sexuality and, for having access to information, they do not consider themselves at risk, thus giving rise to health risk.

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