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When and Why Do Young People in the United Kingdom First Use Sexual Health Services?

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CONTEXT: Many young people think about and take steps to obtain adequate protection only after having sexual intercourse for the first time. Consequently, they are at increased risk of unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.

METHODS: Between June and August 1999, a self-administered questionnaire was distributed to attendees at UK youth-targeted sexual health services to investigate when and why they first use a sexual health service, reasons for delaying use, and sexual behavior and contraceptive practice before first use.

RESULTS: Of the 747 respondents, 29% had used a sexual health service before ever having sex, most commonly "to be prepared." In contrast, 61% of respondents had used a service after sexual debut; some of these had obtained condoms elsewhere (25% of women and 33% of men who gave a reason for delay) or had not known about services or their location (11-19%). Among the women, 20-24% had been embarrassed or scared, or concerned about confidentiality or age; 32% had visited a provider because they had had unprotected sex. Sixty-three percent of men who had delayed using a service reported that the ability to obtain free condoms had prompted their first visit. Only 43% of respondents who postponed service use had practiced contraception consistently before visiting a provider.

CONCLUSIONS: Young people need to be realistic about the possibility of having sex. Service use could be increased by providing more youth-specific services and by improving publicity and links between the youth, education and health sectors to dispel fears and myths about services.

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