

Our Voice

Assessing Student Attitudes to Sexual Health Services in Scotland



WAVERLEY
care Positive about HIV, Hep C
& Sexual Health in Scotland

What's the research about?

Research has shown that rates of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) are on the rise in the UK, but budget cuts over the past decade have led to a dramatic drop in the number of people getting tested. If caught early, STIs are easily treatable but if left untreated can cause severe health problems. University students are one of the highest-risk group for STIs in Scotland, and so we carried out research to find out what would encourage them to get tested for STIs. We interviewed students about their knowledge and experiences of STI testing, exploring what factors may encourage or prevent their decision to get tested.

What did we find out?

Overall, there is a lack of information and accessible STI testing services, with insufficient resources to cater for students' needs on university campuses. We found that there is a difference in the knowledge, attitudes and experiences of students who had previously been tested for STIs from those who not previously been tested. Specifically, we found the following factors had the most influence on students' decision-making around STI testing:

Attitudes

In general, everyone thought STI testing was a good idea. Students who had previously been tested considered it a priority for their overall health and saw testing as part of their regular check-ups. Those who had not previously been tested did not consider it to be a part of their general health.

"Until there's actually a problem I kind of put off doing it." (Not previously tested)

"I had a lot of health anxiety when I was younger so I just wanted to get tested routinely." (Previously tested)

Knowledge

No-one had received any sex education at university, so research participants mostly learnt about STI testing from friends, family, TV, internet searches and social media. Students who had previously been tested knew more about the health risks that can develop from STIs, such as fertility problems, than those who had not previously been tested. This knowledge contributed to students' decisions on whether to get tested.

“If you contracted HIV obviously the risk is pretty high. Something like chlamydia is unpleasant but treatable, but not necessarily a huge risk.” (Not previously tested)

“People on Geordie Shore or something being like ‘oh I’ve had chlamydia five times,’ I think I was just always very conscious that I wanted to not have one.” (Previously tested)

Stigma

All research participants felt there was less stigma around STI testing at university than in their hometowns. But everyone still felt they could be judged for getting an STI test, and women felt this more acutely than men. Students who had not previously been tested were more likely to have experienced judgement from a healthcare professional before, and were less likely to have friends or family who talked openly about sex or sexual health while they were growing up. These experiences of social stigma influenced their decision to not to get an STI test.

“I’ve been to the pharmacy to get the morning after pill before and felt very judged by the clinician, it would make me more nervous about [getting STI tested] in case it wasn’t a good experience.” (Not previously tested)

“It’s like a taboo, [my friends and I] didn’t really talk about going and getting tested. My friends were all virgins, they didn’t talk about that with their parents.”
(Not previously tested)

Practicalities

Everyone thought it was easy to get an STI test. But the practicalities of getting tested were often incompatible with students’ lifestyles, for example, the distance of the clinic or waiting and appointment times. Research participants often blamed themselves for being lazy when they experienced these barriers, even though arranging an STI test was more complicated than they originally expected:

“I saw a nurse and she gave me a swab test. I wanted to get my blood tested as well but they didn’t have any appointments, I’m too lazy to do it.” (Previously tested)

What will we do with this research?

This research shows that there are not enough easily accessible STI testing facilities for students on university campuses that fit in with students’ lives. There is also not enough sex education on university campuses for students, which Waverley Care will promote/pursue more research into/advocate for. We will also carry out more research and policy initiatives on providing more sex positive and non-judgemental teaching methods at school, which the research has shown is a significant factor in whether young people get STI testing as part of their overall general health.

Tweetable extract: Student attitudes to STI testing are positive, but lack of information and accessible testing means students are less likely to get tested.