Alcohol and Risk Behaviour: Sexual Health

Karen Hughes and Michela Morleo
Centre for Public Health
Liverpool John Moores University

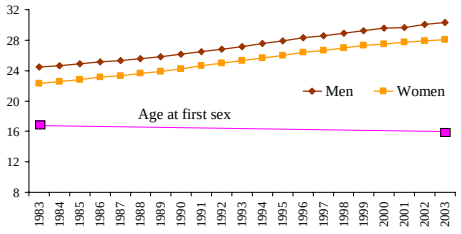
Overview

- Sexual behaviour in Britain
- Sexual health problems
- Links between alcohol and sexual behaviour
- Alcohol and sexual assault
- Prevention and linking interventions

Sexual Behaviour in Britain

- Average age of first sex = 16
- Trend for later marriage

Median age at first marriage, England & Wales



Wellings et al, 2002; ONS 2006

Sexual Behaviour in Britain

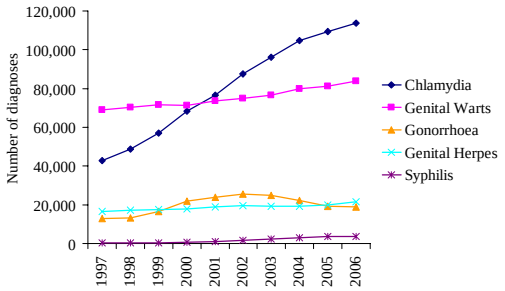
Between 1990 and 2000:

- **Number of sexual partners increased**
  - Highest in 16-24 year olds
  - In last five years
  - Males 5.3, Females 3.8
- **Number of concurrent partners increased:**
  - Levels nearly doubled in women
  - Highest in 16-24 year olds
  - 1 in 5 men, 1 in 8 women
- **Condom use:**
  - Use at first sex increasing
  - Over 80% 16-19 year olds used condom at first sex

Wellings et al, 2001

Sexually Transmitted Infections

New diagnoses of STIs, 1997-2006, UK



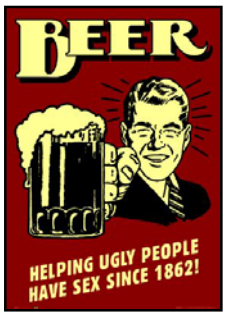
Health Protection Agency, 2007

Teenage Pregnancy

- Highest rates in Western Europe
- Decreasing in older teenagers (16+)
- Increasing in younger groups (<16)
- 2005:
- 42,000 conceptions in under 18s
- Almost half terminated through abortion

Alcohol and Sex

- **Affects cognitive functioning:**
  - Reduces inhibitions
  - Increases confidence
  - Hampers information processing
  - Reduces risk perceptions
  - Increases perceptions of attractiveness
- **Affects physical functioning:**
  - Increases vulnerability
  - Prevents self-defence
  - Affects sexual performance
- **Alcohol expectancies:**
  - Excuse for risky behaviour
  - Gender roles and sexual availability
  - Excuse for violent behaviour



Alcohol and Risky Sex

- Early alcohol use associated with early sexual initiation
- 40% of sexually active 13-14 year olds were 'drunk or stoned' when they first had sex
- 20% males and 13% females aged 15-19 say alcohol was a main reason for first sex
- One in ten 15-16 year olds have had sex after drinking that they later regretted
- Young people over twice as likely to have sex unprotected if they are drunk

IREFREA study

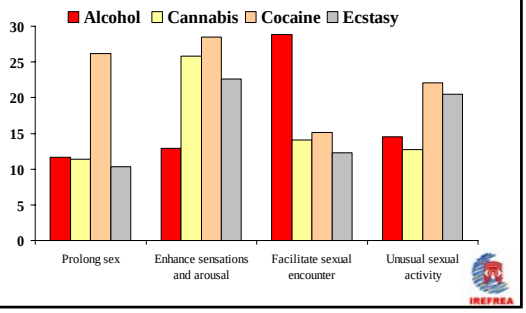
- 1,341 16-35 year olds from 9 European cities
  - Liverpool, Palma de Mallorca, Berlin, Ljubljana, Lisbon, Prague, Venice, Athens, Vienna
- Individuals who drank before age 16 three times more likely to have had sex before age 16
- Having been drunk in the last 4 weeks associated with (in the last 12 months):
  - Having had five or more sexual partners
  - Having had sex without a condom
  - Having regretted sex after drink/drugs
  - Not having had sex as too drunk or high

IREFREA

Bellis and Hughes, in prep

Sex functions of drugs

Percentage of users reporting using Substances for sexual purposes



Sexual Functions of Alcohol

- Alcohol used by both sexes to facilitate sexual encounters
- *"..it gives you a lot more confidence. I mean if you go into a club and see a good-looking boy and you're like, no I couldn't possibly, get a couple of drinks down you, well maybe. He may give me a chance and if he's had a couple of drinks… when I'm on alcohol, I'm extremely confident"* (Female, 17)
  - Confidence to approach people
  - Belief that people are more open to sexual advances if they have been drinking

- *"if you do anything wrong.. Then you can just blame it on the drink. I planned to [have sex with someone] and then got drunk and did it and blamed it on the drinking"*

Coleman and Cater, 2005

Body image, alcohol and sex

- *I am dead skinny when I am drunk, I would wear the skimpiest little bikini and I would look fab in it."* Female, 21-24 years
- Research in US:
  - Concerns around body image linked to:
    - Binge drinking
    - Sex under the influence of alcohol and drugs
    - Inconsistent condom use
    - Multiple sexual partners

Home Office 2003; Littleton et al, 2005

Beyond Confidence

- *"If like you're really nervous about having sex you'd have to drink more, wouldn't you? And you'd be so out of it that you'd totally forget about using contraception"* (Male, 17)
- *"I've actually woken up next to a girl and I didn't have a clue who she was. And when I got up I was like, "What's your name? Like, who were you?"* (Male, 16)
- *"I've had previous problems with alcohol where I've been so drunk that I can't actually remember things that have happened and the next morning, or the next couple of weeks, I get told about things and then it [having sex with someone] suddenly comes back and I think, oh my God, what have I done?"* (Female, 16)

Alcohol and Sexual Assault

Perpetrators:

- increased confidence
- increased aggression

Victims:

- Poor information processing
- Warning signs missed
- Increased vulnerability

- 58% of incarcerated rapists drank prior to the assault
- 1 in 3 rape victims have been drinking
- Men specifically targeting drunk women for sexual assault
  - less able to resist; less likely to report
  - Risky journeys home: Bogus taxis, 'friends'

Alcohol and Sexual Assault

Nightlife environments frequent scenes of sexual assault

- Liverpool study, 18-35 year olds
- 14% women & 4% men sexually molested (groped) during a night out in the last 12 months.
- Average alcohol consumption: males 24 units, females 16 units
- Those drinking >20 units twice as likely to report sexual molestation
- Drink spiking
  - 80% drinking
  - 60% blood alcohol levels >150%mg
  - cannabis 26%, cocaine 11%
  - unadmitted sedative drugs in 2%

Pederson and Skrondal, 1996; Scott-Ham and Burton, 2006

Sexual Consent

- Intoxicated victims:
  - Less likely to report
  - Less likely to gain a conviction

Case law = intoxicated individuals still have the capacity to consent

Consequences of Sexual Assault

- Consequences of sexual violence:
  - Physical injury
  - Psychological damage
    - PTSD, depression, anxiety
    - Suicide
  - Sexually transmitted infections
  - Unwanted pregnancy
  - Rejection by partner
  - Social isolation
  - Substance misuse
- Alcohol as a coping mechanism
  - Alcohol abuse increased after sexual assault
  - Adult and child

Alcohol and Sex Campaigns

Alcohol and Sexual Dysfunction

- Beer goggles, sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancy

Males

- Difficulty achieving and maintaining erection
- Retarded ejaculation
- Sperm defects
- Impotence
- Infertility

Females

- Difficulty achieving orgasm
- Heavy or irregular periods
- Spontaneous abortion
- Infertility
- Breast cancer

Sexual Health Prevention

- Mass media/communication
- Sex education
- Condom provision in community settings
- Chlamydia screening
- Well evaluated programmes are rare
- **Often no mention of alcohol use**
- **Limited links between alcohol and sexual health services**

Developing Skills

- Perceptions of alcohol's facilitating role in sex start early
- Alcohol frequently used for sex at early age
  - *"You feel more confident around the opposite sex [with alcohol]. Most of the time you get what you want because the girl likes you and doesn't want to let you down"* (Male, 14-15 years)
- Life skills training
  - Improving self-esteem, confidence, assertiveness, decision making and aspirations
- Addressing cultural attitudes to gender and power relations
- Increasing knowledge

Summary

- Declines in Sexual Health
  - closely linked to binge drinking
- Sex with alcohol is common
  - Substances used to increase confidence and enhance sex
  - Substances linked to risky sex
- Safe sex messages rarely tested in these conditions
  - Professionals understanding of sexual effects poor
  - Prevention relationship poorly developed
- Links start early
  - Removing positive associations
  - Stressing negative effects
- Opportunities
  - Alcohol imagery in Sexual Health
  - Sexual "effects" of alcohol – key intelligence