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Federal University of Rio de Janeiro State



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## RESEARCH

### Comportamento sexual de ingressantes universitários

Sexual behaviour among initial academic students

Comportamiento sexual de ingresantes universitarios

Maritza Rodrigues Borges<sup>1</sup>, Rodrigo Eurípedes da Silveira<sup>2</sup>, Álvaro da Silva Santos<sup>3</sup>, Umberto Gazi Lippi<sup>4</sup>

#### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** Describe the sexual practices of beginner students of a Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil. **Method:** Exploratory and cross-sectional study which included 786 academics enrolled in courses of the health area. **Results:** 623 (79.3%) were female and the average age was  $19.2 \pm 3.1$  years. 693 (88.2%) adolescents had started sexual life, of which 332 (47.9%) has sexual relations with regular partner and 135 (19.5%) reported regular use of condom. **Conclusion:** It shows the need of health education actions targeted to the teen population in the University context, especially those of health area, with a view to prevention and to the adoption of healthy habits, highlighting not only biological aspects, but also psychosocial and behavioral. **Descriptors:** Sexual behavior, Adolescent, Students, Health occupations.

#### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** Descrever as práticas sexuais de ingressantes de uma universidade federal do interior de Minas Gerais. **Método:** Estudo exploratório, de corte transversal, que incluiu 786 acadêmicos matriculados em cursos da área da saúde. **Resultados:** 623 (79,3%) eram do gênero feminino e a idade média encontrada foi de  $19,2 \pm 3,1$  anos. 693 (88,2%) jovens tinham iniciado vida sexual, dos quais 332 (47,9%) mantinham relações sexuais com parceiro fixo e 135 (19,5%) relataram fazer uso regular de preservativo. **Conclusão:** Depreende-se a necessidade de ações de educação em saúde direcionadas à população adolescente no contexto universitário, sobretudo aqueles da área de saúde, com vistas à prevenção e a adoção de hábitos saudáveis, destacando não somente aspectos biológicos, mas também psicossociais e comportamentais. **Descritores:** Comportamento sexual, Adolescente, Estudantes de ciências da saúde.

#### RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** Describir las prácticas sexuales de ingresantes en una Universidad Federal de Minas Gerais, Brazil. **Metodo:** Estudio exploratorio, transversal, que incluyó 786 académicos matriculados en cursos del área de salud. **Resultados:** 623 (79,3%) eran mujeres y la edad mediana fue de  $19,2 \pm 3,1$  años. 693 (88,2%) jóvenes habían iniciado su vida sexual, de los cuales 332 (47,9%) tenían relaciones sexuales con pareja estable y 135 (19,5%) hacían uso regular de condón. **Conclusión:** Se depende la necesidad de acciones de Educación en Salud dirigidas a la población adolescente en el contexto universitario, especialmente aquellos del área de salud, direccionadas a la prevención y a la adopción de hábitos saludables, destacando los aspectos no sólo biológicos, pero también psicossociales y conductuales. **Descriptor:** Comportamiento sexual, Adolescente, Estudiantes de ciencias de la salud.

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## INTRODUCTION

As much as there are discussions about the pandemic of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) and Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), issues related to sexuality - central to and inherent in human nature - they still require more comprehensive and specific investigations<sup>1-2</sup>. According to the UNAIDS report, worldwide, about 35 million people are infected with AIDS and in 2010, 2.7 million people were newly infected globally, of which 42% of the new cases occurred in young people between 15 and 24 years old.<sup>3</sup>

In Latin America, there are about 1.4 million people infected with HIV and half of that quota are Brazilian. Among the population of adolescents (10 to 19 years old), there is predominance of these cases in females, for which they are suggested numerous assumptions, for lacking a broader research<sup>4</sup>. For the prevention of STDs, statistics suggest that more 60% of young people in Western Europe, Central and East use condoms<sup>5</sup>, as in the United States<sup>6</sup>, Portugal<sup>7</sup> and in São Paulo<sup>8</sup>. However, these studies reflect that there's change in the use of contraceptive methods related to the type of relationship (whether fixed or not), ie, people no longer worry about STDs and care only about the possibility of an unwanted pregnancy.

Added to this that entry into the University can be considered a impulsionante factor for the expression of adolescent sexuality, apart from being exposed to new experiences, which are associated with the use of alcohol and other drugs, experiencing numerous influences and open to new experiences that before were prohibited or restricted by family proximity.

Some studies have addressed relevant aspects of the issue, especially about the perception of personal risk and preventive behavior in the opinion of young people themselves, especially those enrolled in earlier periods, which results indicate high knowledge of the risks related to unprotected sexual conduct despite a behavior that is not consistent with this information.<sup>9-10</sup> Although students in the health area maintain broad access to information at the university and use them in approach to customers through guidance, diagnosis and treatment, studies have shown that their level of knowledge about STD / AIDS does not change their sexual risk-taking, for considering themselves as invulnerable to acquire such diseases.<sup>11-12</sup>

To consider these perspectives, it is assumed that entry into the University has an impact on sexual life of young people and in particular those who are in the initial stages and have greater willingness to participate in parties and nightly events. This way, it justifies the need to better understand the attitudes related to sexual behavior of college freshmen, as in this study, which aims to describe the sexual practices of students enrolled in courses in the health area of a Federal University in the interior of Minas Gerais.

## METHOD

This research is of a descriptive methodological design, cross-cut and non-probability sampling, to consider all students in the first periods of undergraduate courses in Biomedicine, Nursing, Physiotherapy, Nutrition, Medicine, Psychology and Occupational Therapy, enrolled in the years 2011 and 2012. Data collection took place between March 2011 and November 2012, and from the universe of 823 students, 95.5% (786) agreed to participate.

We used a semi-structured questionnaire, built from Alves and Lopes referencial<sup>13</sup>, tested and adjusted in pilot testing at another institution of higher education under the supervision of the researchers. As for the data collection procedure, there was wide publication on campus, on murals, classrooms and academic directories inviting them to participate in research in the intervals of class schedules. Data collection was conducted in a classroom available for this purpose, in the morning and afternoon. Students responded to the questionnaire in an average time of 20 minutes.

The study design was approved by the Ethics Committee on Research on Human Beings of the Federal University of Triangulo Mineiro, following the rules established by Resolution 196/96 of the National Health Council.

For the questionnaire were selected for this study in particular the following objective questions: (A) Have you ever had sex?; (B) Did you use a contraceptive method at first intercourse?; (C) Are you sexually active?; (D) Do you have a fixed partner?; (E) What is the frequency of the use of the condom?, and (F) Did you use a condom in your last sexual intercourse?. The issues identified by letters, (b), (c), (d), (e) and (f) were answered only by young people who had their first sexual activity, ie, had intercourse. The variables of interest were: gender; age; religion; family income and living conditions.

All data was stored in a database built in *Excel* v.2010 software (Microsoft Corporation, USA). From the results, we proceeded to descriptive analysis in absolute (n) and relative (%) frequencies, apart from the *chi-square* test to verify the association between the answers to consider  $p < 0.05$ , processed using *Statistical Package for Social Sciences - SPSS* v.20.0.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Among the 786 students surveyed, 623 (79.3%) were female and 163 (20.7%) were male. The average age was  $19.2 \pm 3.1$  years, with a higher prevalence of students in medical courses (18.1%), occupational therapy (14.9%), physical therapy (14.8%) and Nursing (14.8%). Most teenagers, both female (60.2%) and male (57.1%) reported living with friends and about 71% of the academics were living in boarding or republics. Other data of interest indicates that the preferred leisure activity among surveyed youth is attending parties or evening events, both among the male population (54%) and female (71.1%).

Many of the adolescents declared themselves white (64.6%); no religion (67.2%); coming from São Paulo (46.6%) and Minas Gerais (41.5%); and family income between 3 and 5 minimum wages - MW (41.7%), established at the time of research in R \$ 622.00. In table 1 is shown a similar distribution of sexual initiation (intercourse) between genders, with higher prevalence of this condition in the age group of 16-17 years, family income of one to three minimum wages, living with friends and has no religion. In relation to the use of contraceptive methods at the time of first sexual intercourse, the majority of responses indicated non-use, more prevalent in females, aged 20 years and over living alone and having a religion.

Sexual initiation of adolescents surveyed was significantly associated with age between 16 and 17 years ( $p = 0.001$ ), and family income between one and three minimum wages ( $p < 0.001$ ), and has no religion ( $p = 0.013$ ). The fact of not using a condom at first intercourse was associated only to the age of 20 years or more ( $p = 0.031$ ), as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1 - Distribution of academics regarding sexual initiation and condom use at first sex. Uberaba / MG, 2011-2012.**

	Have you had sex?					Used condom at 1st sex?				
	Yes		No		S	Yes		No		S
	Number	%	n	%		n	%	Number	%	
<b>Gender</b>										
Female	549	88.1	74	11.8	0.938	151	27.5	398	72.5	0.441
Male	144	88.3	19	11.7		35	24.3	109	65.7	
<b>Age</b>										
16-17 years	163	95.9	7	4.1	<0.001*	42	25.8	121	74.2	0.031*
18-19 years	286	84.1	54	15.9		91	31.8	195	68.2	
20 or over	244	88.4	32	11.6		53	21.7	191	78.3	
<b>Family Income</b>										
1 to 3 MW	294	97.3	8	2.7	<0.001*	72	24.5	222	75.5	0.635
3 to 5 MW	297	90.5	31	9.5		83	28.0	214	72.0	
More than	102	65.4	54	34.6		31	30.4	71	69.6	

5 MW									
Lives with									
Friends	404	86.3	13.2		115	28.5	289	71.5	
Family members	217	92.7	7.3	0.198	56	25,8	161	74.2	0.434
Alone	72	85.7	14.3		15	20.8	57	79.2	
Religion									
Has	222	86.0	14.0		57	25,7	165	74.3	
Does not have	471	89.2	10.8	0.013 *	129	27.4	342	62.6	0.154
<b>Total</b>	<b>693</b>	<b>88.2</b>	<b>11.8</b>		<b>186</b>	<b>26.8</b>	<b>507</b>	<b>73.2</b>	

\* = Significant Association.

Table 2 shows the results of those young people who began their sexual life with regard to keeping sexually active and stable partner. In this sense, for the sexually active these parameters prevailed: females, aged 18-19 years, family income of three to five salaries, living alone and have a religion, but without statistical significance. The fact of having a steady partner was associated with female gender ( $p < 0.001$ ), between 16 and 17 years ( $p = 0.034$ ). A family income between 3 and 5 MW was associated with not having a steady partner ( $p = 0.03$ ). In addition, most of the young people who lived alone and possessed religion mentioned they do not have a steady partner.

**Table 2 - Distribution of academics at UFTM on active sex life and stable partners. Uberaba / MG, 2011-2012.**

	Has an active sex life?					has a steady partner?				
	Yes		No		S	Yes		No		S
	n	%	n	%		n	%	Number	%	
<b>Gender</b>										
Female	508	92.5	41	7.5	0.157	288	52.4	261	47.6	<
Male	128	88.8	16	11.2		44	30.5	100	69.5	0.001*
<b>Age</b>										
16-17 years	146	91.4	17	8.6		87	53.4	76	46.6	
18-19 years	267	93.3	19	6.7	0.360	144	50.3	142	49.7	0.034 *
20 or over	223	91.4	21	8.6		101	41.4	143	58.6	
<b>Family Income</b>										
1 to 3 SM	265	41,7	29	50,9		138	41,5	156	43,2	
3 to 5 SM	275	43,2	22	38,6	0,939	140	47,1	157	52,9	0.030 *
More than 5 MW	96	15,1	6	10,5		54	52,3	48	47,7	
<b>Lives with</b>										
Friends	345	90,5	36	9,5		195	51,2	186	48,8	
Family members	223	92,9	17	7,1	0,359	107	44,6	133	55,4	0.544
Alone	68	94,4	4	5,6		30	41,7	42	58,3	

Religion										
Has	204	91,9	18	7,1	0,397	93	41,9	129	58,1	0.148
Does not have	43	52,4	39	47,6		239	50,7	232	49,3	
<b>Total</b>	<b>636</b>	<b>91.8</b>		<b>8.2</b>		<b>332</b>	<b>47.9</b>	<b>361</b>	<b>52.1</b>	

\* = Significant Association.

In Table 3, the results regarding the use of contraception and its continued use covering the six months preceding the survey are presented. Regarding the non-use of condoms in their last intercourse, there was a prevalence of women (79.8%), aged between 18 and 19 years (42.4%) with an income between 3 and 5 MW (43.4%). Among those who used a condom at last sex, students living with friends prevailed (55.8%) and those who had no religion (71.2%), which were not statistically significant.

As to the frequency of condom use, more prevalent were students with infrequent use between the groups receiving 3-5 MW and among those who frequently use condom was more prevalent among those with family income 1-3 MS, although without statistical significance.

**Table 3 - Distribution of students on the use of condom at last intercourse and the frequency of their use. Uberaba / MG, 2011-2012.**

	Used condom at last intercourse?					Frequency of use of condom				
	Yes		No		S	Infrequent <sup>1</sup>		Frequent <sup>2</sup>		S
	n	%	Number	%		n	%	n	%	
<b>Gender</b>										
Female	229	41,7	320	58,3	0,659	443	80,7	106	19,3	0.823
Male	63	43,7	81	56,3		115	79,9	29	20,1	
<b>Age</b>										
16-17 years	74	45,4	89	54,6		132	81,0	31	19,0	
18-19 years	116	40,5	170	59,5	0,602	227	79,4	59	20,6	0.806
20 or over	102	41,8	142	58,2		199	81,5	45	18,5	
<b>Family Income</b>										
1 to 3 SM	121	41,1	173	58,9		233	79,2	61	20,8	
3 to 5 SM	123	41,4	174	58,6	0,116	242	81,5	55	18,5	0.237
More than 5 MW	48	47,1	54	52,9		83	81,4	19	19,6	
<b>She lives with</b>										
Friends	97	40,4	143	59,6		205	85,4	35	14,6	
Family members	163	42,8	218	57,2	0,551	296	77,7	85	22,3	0.770
Alone	32	44,4	40	55,6		57	79,2	15	10,8	
<b>Religion</b>										
Has	84	37,8	138	62,2	0,774	173	77,9	49	22,1	0.058
Does not have	208	44,2	263	55,8		385	81,7	86	18,3	
<b>Total</b>	<b>292</b>	<b>42,1</b>	<b>401</b>	<b>58,9</b>		<b>558</b>	<b>80,5</b>	<b>135</b>	<b>19,5</b>	

<sup>1</sup> = Refers to the condom use in 50% of cases; <sup>2</sup> refers to the use of condoms greater than 50% of the time.

While approaching the limit of this research, there is the fact that the study population included only the students of the first semester of graduate courses from a single institution of higher education. However, one can reflect that this population is not well known and having distinct characteristics in emotional level, psychological life experience and others possibly similar to other higher education institutions.

Understanding the moment of entry into the University as a unique event in the life of these young people, it is considered the hypothesis that they are open to new experiences, influenced by various changes in your routine, especially in the initial stages, in what is experienced a live far from parents and/or friends and university colleagues, the wide availability of nightly events and parties that involve the consumption of alcoholic beverages, and other situations in which these young people might be more likely to express their sexuality.

The findings of this research indicate a similar proportion of sexual initiation between genders and among those who had already had sex, highest prevalence was found in living with friends (58.3%) and had no religion (68%). About 73% of respondents do not use any contraceptive method at first intercourse, and the fact of using condoms on this occasion was only associated to the age group 18-19 years. One has to consider the representation of sexual initiation has for teens and can be considered from the moment of intercourse to a demarcation of a stage of life, the discovery of the body or awakening of their sexuality.<sup>14</sup>

A study involving adolescents from 27 Brazilian capitals found a positive association ( $p > 0.001$ ) among those who practiced sex without condom use and consumption of alcohol and illegal drugs, which proportions were 32% and 43% respectively higher to consider using the last 30 days prior to the survey.<sup>10</sup>

In the research conducted with academics from Fortaleza it was observed that most of the participants were female (67.1%); had already initiated their sexual life (63.4%); without performing HIV testing (80%). The average age at first intercourse was 17.2 years. The authors found limited knowledge about HIV prevention, favorable attitudes to condom use, low perception of risk in their practices, and ignorance of their HIV status, demonstrating the need to invest in educational activities on sexuality and STD/AIDS at the university.<sup>15</sup>

In this sense, early sexual initiation brings into focus the need to implement sexual orientation parameters directed to children and adolescents of school age, especially in the elementary years, that this young person can make use of these preventive information at the beginning of their sex life while minimizing the risks inherent in a disoriented and unprotected practice. Moreover, protective factors can be considered on sexual practice of adolescents to better schooling, better social conditions, living with both parents, and may delay the age of sexual initiation and facilitate the use of protection at first intercourse.<sup>16</sup>

The vast majority of young people already have sexual initiation, 636 (91.8%) of the students maintain an active sex life and about half 332 (47.9%) had a steady partner. Among these issues the statistical association was observed only for having a steady partner, being female and having 18 or 19 years. With a sample of 183 sexually active academics of Londrina, in the first and last year, it was found that the first-year students had first sexual

intercourse earlier than the others and showed a low perception of personal risk of acquiring STD/AIDS even exposed to partners in the past that did not use condoms.<sup>1</sup>

In Spain, among academics who had a steady partner, sexual initiation was early and they had a higher frequency of intercourse.<sup>17</sup> Stable relationships can result in decreased use of condoms, because the priority is no longer the protection of sexually transmitted diseases, but becoming only the prevention of pregnancy.<sup>18</sup>

The results of this research showed low adherence to contraception, reinforcing the need for proper guidance and effective for healthy adolescent sexuality. Despite the proportion of condom use increased between the first and last sexual intercourse (26.8% and 42.1%), the frequency of systematical (common) use was low (19.1%). Among the factors associated with these data, we can mention the emotional involvement of the moment, finances, and access to methods, as well as the degree of freedom and autonomy achieved in this age group. In this sense, the installation of condom machines on campus, as experimented in Ethiopia, may result in increased use of condoms.<sup>19</sup>

Another study of the same nature, with academics from the Santos region in the first and third year of college, it became clear that sexual initiation occurred in the range of 15 to 17 years old. Condom use was associated with concerns about contraception, followed by prevention of sexually transmitted diseases - STDs. Knowledge about the HPV was restricted in the study population.

Although increasing from the first to the third year, its assessment in the knowledge transmission, consequences and prevention is relativized. The research pointed out the need to provide information about the HPV in attention to the specificities of the disease.<sup>20</sup>

Among those who prevented themselves, the contraception method elected by adolescents was condoms (32.5%), followed to a lesser extent by the pill, a fact that is consistent with another study.<sup>21</sup> Research on contraceptive practices of 487 students of a public university, identified high rates of use of these methods, especially condoms and the pill. Emergency contraception had been used by half of students, often concomitantly to high efficiency methods. Among women, there was a relationship between emergency contraception use with factors such as age, sexual initiation, having stopped using condoms in any sexual relationship, having experienced accidental breakage of condoms, which is more closely related to inconsistencies the use of regular methods than to not using itself.<sup>12</sup>

Another study found the use of condoms in 60% of 633 surveyed academics; having candidiasis, non-stable marital relationship and partner belonging to the area of health meant a protective factor for condom use in the first and last intercourse.<sup>22</sup> In a qualitative study about the choice of contraceptive method and its relationship with prevention of sexually transmitted diseases among college students, the results indicated the need for changes in the attitude of future health professionals, either in the current way of teaching, whether in the way of support so that they really understand the importance and necessity of safe sexual practices associated with the use of contraceptive methods.<sup>11</sup>

On the other end, the importance of educational activities that focus on Sexual Health theme aimed at university population in the graduation context is to be assumed. An experience report of an educational activity related to sexuality conducted with 26

adolescents in a situation of multiple vulnerability in a city in the interior of Rio Grande do Sul, presented as a result the possible formation of a health education from the dialogical, the playful, of free and contributive expression to the construction of knowledge, in which the teenager also takes an active role in the learning process.<sup>23</sup>

For these perspectives, we question the role of the university in this context, as well as the implications of health behaviors of students in their future practices. Factors such as the perception of invulnerability and influences and risk behaviors practiced by these young people reflect the need for extensive work in training of the future professionals in the health field.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this research point to a university profile predominantly female, with an average age of  $19.2 \pm 3.1$  years, white, without religion, from the state of São Paulo and Minas Gerais, with family income between three and five minimum wages. Most young people living with friends in boardings or republics and had as a preferred leisure activity the act of going to parties or evening dances.

With regard to sexual behavior, the vast majority of academics had already had sexual intercourse, with similar distribution between genders. The first sexual intercourse occurred between 15 and 17 years of age without the use of contraception on this occasion and yet maintain active sex life without a steady partner, most still not using the condom. Friends were identified as the main source of sexuality information.

The data, which is based on characteristics of a single institution of higher education, draw attention to basic issues that can mean failure in the early stages of training of the future health professionals. It is recommended, therefore, that health education activities are directed at adolescents who enter universities, especially in the health area, preparing these future professionals for both a healthier life, highlighting not only biological, but also psychosocial and behavioral issues. The vulnerability of these young people should be emphasized, not only in the individual aspect, but also in the program and in the social environment, contributing to the formation of critical and reflective students, in order to transform reality.

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