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What are universities doing to support student sexual health?

In the midst of a sexual health crisis, universities are under growing pressure to provide support, education and resources to students to help them look after their health and protect themselves from pregnancy and STIs. So how are they supporting students?

For many students, university is their first time being independent and living away from home. Naturally, it will also be the first time that many students properly explore sex and relationships, away from the prying eyes of parents. In 2018, the students' union (SU) at the University of Bristol launched their 'Let's Talk about Sex' survey, finding that 36% of students had never had sex when they started university. Universities are in a unique position to offer the services and advice that students need when they enter the world of adult sex and relationships.

'Unfortunately inconsistent'

Sadly, the support on offer varies from university to university. "Provision of sexual health services is unfortunately inconsistent between universities," said a spokesperson for [Sexpression UK](#), a charity supporting university students to teach peer sex education.

"We believe that quality sexual and reproductive health services by universities should include [barrier methods](#), pregnancy tests, access to [sexual health testing](#) where available, and advice and education regarding all aspects of sexual and reproductive health."

So where should students look for comprehensive support with their sexual health? "The best place to start is your students' union," says Eva Crossan Jory, [National Union of Students \(NUS\)](#) Vice President Welfare. SUs are the voice of students at their universities and provide support and advice, including on sexual health. "Many will have comprehensive and very broad sexual health help," she says.

"As well as [contraception](#), your SU might have less common services available, from offering free rape alarms, 'giving consent' classes, or facilitating counselling services for sexual health issues. If you're in need of counselling in relation to sex, your university (rather than students' union) should also have appointments to help you."

Free condoms

No more complaining about condoms being too expensive. Most universities will make condoms freely available to students, particularly during Freshers' Week, although this enthusiasm can tail off later into term. According to one student, condoms are regularly thrown out across the crowd in clubs at her university. Barrier methods like condoms and dental dams are the only way to protect yourself from [sexually transmitted infections](#) (STIs).

On top of this, C-Card free condom schemes run across the country, distributing condoms and lube from pharmacies, SUs and other accessible venues, or even delivering to your door. Many of these schemes stock a range of sizes and types of condoms to choose from so that you can find a fit and feel that both you and your partner enjoy. Some offer female [internal condoms](#) (Femidoms).

Some C-Card schemes also offer free dental dams for vaginal or anal oral sex, but if not, these protective sheets of latex can also be made yourself by cutting up a condom. Dental dams are often more readily available through LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer) societies.

As well as condoms, other forms of contraception to prevent pregnancy are available from university sexual health services. But if contraception fails or isn't used, universities should support students with their options, whether they decide to continue with a pregnancy or have an [abortion](#). Each university has its own policies and assistance available. Free or cheaper pregnancy tests are often available through sexual health services, women's officers or the SU, as well as campus pharmacies.

Getting tested

Young people are public enemy number one when it comes to STI testing. 16- to 25-year-olds continue to have the [highest diagnosis rates](#) of STIs of any age group. Newfound independence and access to [alcohol](#) make one-night stands and risky sexual behaviour more likely, putting university students particularly at risk for STIs. Protecting your own and your partner's sexual health is key to having enjoyable and healthy sex whether you're in a committed relationship or having casual sex.

Most universities provide sexual health services to students, and in many cases you won't even have to leave campus to be seen by a GP or receive support from the SU.

Lots of universities use Freshers' Week to encourage students to get into the habit of getting tested, particularly for [chlamydia](#) as it's the most common STI. Chlamydia tests in exchange for drinks, keyrings and other freebies aren't uncommon. Some student unions provide free chlamydia testing kits in toilets. Local pharmacies nationwide offer free chlamydia testing to under-25s as part of the National Chlamydia Screening Programme - pharmacy appointments can be booked through [Patient Access](#).

Each year, more students are turning to at-home STI testing as a convenient and private way to look after their sexual health. Last year, the number of young people using online services to test for chlamydia [increased by 54%](#). You can order a discreet home testing kit online or sometimes through the university, provide the samples as requested and send it back without having to speak to anyone. The results of the test get sent through by text a few days later.

Sex education and support

It's no secret that sex education is lacking in the UK. The newly updated [curriculum](#) - the first for twenty years - won't be implemented in England until September 2020. For decades a large number of teenagers haven't received [comprehensive sex education](#).

The 'Let's Talk About Sex' survey found that less than a quarter of students felt that their school sex education had prepared them for healthy relationships and just 35% had a comprehensive understanding of consent. But universities are well placed to provide the education and spaces to discuss these issues that young adults are missing.

Some SUs provide education and advice services to students. Sexual health or GUM (genitourinary medicine) clinics, as well as GPs, are also well placed to offer educational support.

In January 2019, young people's sexual health charity Brook conducted a survey of 5,649 students, finding that 56% had experienced unwanted sexual behaviours including harassment, groping, unwanted touching, coercion, [sexual assault](#) and rape. In light of this, they produced an online consent course for university students. Some universities provide their own consent classes. However, this is rarely compulsory and isn't consistent across the country.

So what do you do if your university doesn't provide the sexual health services and support that you need? "It's important you register with a doctor if your place of study is different to your current surgery, so you can access these services at any time," says Crossan Jory from NUS. You can use self-referral applications like Patient Access to find sexual health services in your area.

When it comes to on-campus provisions and education, universities have a duty of care to their students to encourage them to have consensual, healthy and [safe sex](#). However, funding and accessibility of sexual health services can be inconsistent across the country.

It is worth raising the issue of sexual health with your university or SU to encourage them to fulfil their responsibility to students, say Sexpression UK.

"We strongly believe in the importance of this provision and wholeheartedly encourage and support students in asking their universities for more comprehensive services where these are lacking."

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