

Contraception Use Among Young Women In Canada: What Are The Trends?

Young men and women who are having sexual intercourse and do not want a pregnancy need to know about and use contraception. While contraception is a shared responsibility for both partners, much of the research on contraceptive use has tended to focus on the contraceptive practices of women. This may be because women have a particular interest in controlling their own fertility or it could simply be that almost all of the available methods, apart from the condom and male sterilization, are used or taken by women. This article looks at the current practices and recent trends in contraceptive use among young women in Canada. We begin with research on the most commonly used methods of contraception and will then consider trends in contraceptive use among young women including their increasing likelihood of using contraception during penile-vaginal sex.

What are the most commonly used methods of contraception among young women?

A recent national study on the contraceptive practices of Canadian women (see the Black et al. link below) found that among women who had vaginal sexual intercourse in the previous 6 months, 74% of 15 to 19 year-olds said that they always used contraception when they had sexual intercourse compared to 68% of women in their 20s, and 45% of women in their 30s. Given the many contraceptive methods available, it is noteworthy that three currently used methods predominated among 15-19 and 20-29 year-olds who had intercourse in the last six months. These were the male condom, oral contraceptives (i.e., the birth control pill) and withdrawal (pulling the penis out of the vagina before ejaculation) (Table 1). All other 17 methods (e.g., patch, ring, IUD, injection, diaphragm, sponge) were each used by less than 5% (0% - 4.4%).

Table 1: Contraceptive methods currently used by young Canadian women

	15-19	20-29
Male Condom	74.3%	55.5%
Oral Contraceptives	66.6%	58.3%
Withdrawal	17.3%	12.0%

Source: Black, et al. (2009).

It is important to note in relation to the findings in Table 1 that women participating in the study could mention more than one method they had used in the last six months. For example, it's likely that some young women were practicing dual protection against pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STI): 47% of 15-19 year-olds said that they had used condoms and oral contraceptives in the previous six months.

Are patterns of contraceptive use among young women changing?

As mentioned above, condoms and oral contraceptives are the two most commonly used contraceptive methods among young women in Canada. A study of the sexual health and risk behaviours of British Columbia youth provides information on trends in the percentage of youth who reported using these or other methods of contraception the last time they had sexual intercourse (see the Saewyc et al. link below). As you can see in Table 2, the percentage of sexually active young women who reported using condom, pill, or a combination of these and other effective contraceptive methods increased between 1998 and 2003.

Overall, the findings from the Saewyc et al. study clearly show a trend toward increasing contraceptive use among sexually active young women. Perhaps it should not be surprising that the teen pregnancy rate in Canada has been going down as the rate of contraceptive use among teens has gone up.

Table 2: Percentage of young women in British Columbia who used effective contraceptive methods the last time they had intercourse, 1998, 2003

	1998	2003
Condom	52.6%	64.2%
Birth Control Pill	30.6%	44.8%
Effective method (condom, pill, depo provera, diaphragm)	75.7%	86.6%

Source: Saewyc, et al. (2008)



Why are the condom and the birth control pill the most common choices for contraception among young Canadian women?

There are a number of reasons why the condom is a popular birth control choice for young women. The condom is the only contraceptive method that provides significant protection against STIs. This is an important consideration because STIs are very common among sexually active young people (See Check the Research: What are the most common sexually transmitted infections affecting youth? Sexualityandu.ca homepage). Condoms are effective in preventing pregnancy if they are used correctly and every time a person has intercourse. Condoms are also easy to use and less expensive than other methods."

The birth control pill has several advantages which makes it a popular choice for young women. The pill is a female controlled method of birth control which is an important factor for some women – it gives women control over their fertility and decisions about becoming pregnant. When used properly (e.g., remembering to take the pills on schedule), the pill is very effective in preventing pregnancy. For many women the pill is hassle free compared to other methods which may need to be fitted by a medical professional or may not be available in rural areas of the country.

The costs of some methods may be too high for some women, especially if they are not covered by provincial drug plans. Research shows that women tend to use methods that they view positively, and not those that make them feel uncomfortable or anxious. Methods that are thought to be inconvenient, difficult to insert, or that require careful timing when used, may not appeal to some women. Fertility awareness methods may be less favoured for this reason and hence less promoted as an option for younger women. In addition, methods such as IUDs, diaphragms, and hormone-releasing intrauterine devices must be fitted by trained medical professionals and may be less available in remote and/or rural areas. Such methods, as well as sterilization, are more often chosen by older women (see Black et al.) to accommodate contraceptive needs at different stages in their lives. For younger women, the ease of use and ready availability of condoms and oral contraception appear to make these methods the most common choice given their stage of life.

What's the take home message?

The research reviewed in this article clearly shows that most sexually active young women in Canada are practicing birth control and the study from B.C. suggests that the percentage of young women doing so has been increasing. When choosing a birth control method, there are several key considerations to keep in mind (For more information see the Contraception sections of the teen and adult sites on Sexualityandu.ca). If you are planning to use the oral contraceptive pill, it's important to discuss with a doctor or health professional whether the pill is right for you and which type of pill would be best. If you choose a method, like the pill, that does not protect against HIV/STI, it is a very good idea to use condoms as well for "dual protection." Contraceptive use is a key component of sexual health for sexually-active young adults and the research suggests that young women in Canada are increasingly using effective methods of contraception.

Links

Black, A. Yang, Q., Wen, S.W. et al. (2009). Contraceptive use among Canadian women of reproductive age: Results of a national survey. *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology Canada*, July, 627-640.

<http://www.sexualityandu.ca/professionals/pdfs/National%20Contraception%20Survey.pdf>

Saewyc, E., Taylor, D., Homma, Y., & Ogilvie, G. (2008). Trends in sexual health and risk behaviours among adolescent students in British Columbia. *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, 17, 1-13.

http://www.sieccan.org/pdf/saewyc_cjhs2008_trends%20sexual%20health%20bc.pdf

