

Truth be Told: Adolescents' disclosure of sexual activity to providers during a sexual history

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Background/Purpose: Sexual history taking during clinic visits is recommended to help ensure patients receive appropriate sexual and reproductive health services. Although research shows that the prevalence of sexual history taking is sub-optimal, little is known about whether adolescents who receive a sexual history assessment truthfully disclose their sexual activity to providers.

Methods: Data from the 2018 National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior (NSSHB), an Internet-based nationally representative probability survey of the U.S. population, was used to describe self-reported truthfulness of sexually-active 14-24 year olds who had a healthcare visit in the previous year where a sexual history was taken (n=196). We tested for associations between truthfulness and demographics, condom use, and patient-provider dynamics.

Results: Most (88.8%) respondents said they told the provider the truth about their sexual activity. Younger adolescents (14-17-year-olds) were less likely to be truthful than 18-24-year-olds (OR=.12, CI=.04-.34). There were no significant differences in truthfulness by race/ethnicity, biological sex, sexual orientation, or condom use at last sex. Respondents were less likely to be truthful if they reported discomfort with their provider (OR=.14, CI=.04-.46), distrusted their provider (OR= .11, CI=.02-.56) or believed their provider was judging them (OR=.19, CI=.05-.73).

Conclusions: In general, patients were honest with providers about their sexual histories, but younger adolescents may hesitate to disclose sexual activity, perhaps due to confidentiality concerns that impact their relationships with providers. Truthfulness may be improved by addressing provider/patient dynamics like comfort and trust.

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