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## Online Health Information Needs of Unmet Young People

We present a descriptive analysis of 963 queries obtained through e-mails from unmet young people regarding their health needs. Boys had more queries on sexuality and masturbation while queries from girls were related more to psychosocial issues, particularly depression and loneliness.

**Keywords:** Adolescent, Information, Internet, Questions.

Young people frequently use internet as it offers anonymity, privacy and confidentiality. Online counseling, by email and chat for young people, has been tried in some centers with success(1,2).

The author's monthly column named 'Understanding Adolescence' in a National daily since December 2003 dealt with one topic each month as an article. It is not a question-answer column. Readers communicated with the author through email about their health information needs. A checklist of common adolescent complaints and concerns was developed after initial analysis of hundred queries. This was used to record the data from the emails.

Of the 1544 e-mails received during the study period of 26 months, 718 e-mails were excluded and

963 queries from the remaining 826 e-mails formed the subject of the current study.

Queries from boys (722; 75%) and girls (241; 25%) were related to sexuality, body image, psychosocial issues, relationships, academics, career and medical issues. Girls, in addition, had queried about menstrual disorders. Older adolescents raised queries regarding enhancement of academic skills and choice of career.

When compared with girls, boys had asked significantly more questions on sexuality ( $P<0.001$ ) and masturbation ( $P<0.001$ ). More girls queried about psychosocial issues ( $P=0.007$ ), particularly depression and loneliness ( $P<0.001$ ) (Table I). While 19% of the boys were concerned about fear of losing potency and fertility, 6% of the girls were concerned about the chances of urinary tract infection following masturbation. About 8% of the boys sought help on how to control their sexual thoughts. Though, 13% girls reported sexual activity, none of them sought advice on contraception. This

**TABLE I** COMPARISON OF BOYS AND GIRLS ON QUERIES ON SEXUALITY AND PSYCHOSOCIAL ISSUES

	Boys (n=722)	Girls (n=241)	Odds ratio (95%CI)	P value
Queries on sexual issues	308(43%)	52(22%)	2.7(1.9-3.9)	0.001
Masturbation	138(19%)	14(6%)	3.8(2.1-7.1)	0.001
Psychosocial issues	35(5%)	23(10%)	0.5(0.3-0.9)	0.007
Depression	14(2%)	15(6%)	0.3(0.1-0.7)	0.001

highlights the risk taking behavior of the adolescents and the unmet needs about knowledge and attitude to contraception.

While body image concerns among boys were about poor facial hair (6.1%) and size of the penis (5.3%), it was about breast size (12.8%), and fatness (5%) among girls. Polycystic ovarian disease (13.7%) and dysmenorrhea (9.1%) were the commonest menstruation related queries. Prolonged amenorrhea was the reason for concern about polycystic ovarian disorder.

9.41% of the boys had expressed inability to initiate conversation with members of the opposite sex. 3.31% of girls had expressed fear about loss of relationship in the event of refusal of certain requests.

Information, education and counseling needs of unmet young people can be assessed through the internet. Information about sexuality, especially

masturbation should be included in the life skill based health education programs. Online counseling as part of Adolescent Friendly Health Services helps in the maintenance of anonymity, privacy and confidentiality by the health care provider in the provision of information to young people.

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