

SCIENTIFIC LETTERS



schoolchildren had not displayed a significant increase in height- or weight-for-age z-scores between 1989 and 1999, despite a decline in mean menarcheal age, and significant increases in skinfold thicknesses and body mass index (BMI). While the latter reflect recent improvements in nutritional status, increases in overall body size (particularly stature) are likely to require sustained improvements in living conditions.

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At what age are South African women first having sex?

To the Editor: A national cervical abnormality survey published in 2002 collected data from 20 603 women aged 20 years and older. Data were collected from 10 sites covering all provinces in South Africa and included women from rural, urban and peri-urban areas.¹ The age distribution of the total sample was similar to the national age distribution; however, there was an underrepresentation of women in the 20 - 25-year and over 60-year categories. Nonetheless data collected on reproductive history provide us with information on a large sample that is likely to be generalisable to the South African population.

The contraceptive use rate for the 19 861 women in the study for whom contraceptive use data are available is illustrated in Table I. As on average the total population is relatively old (mean age 37.7 years, range 20 - 95 years, standard deviation (SD) 11.8 years), it is not surprising that 54% of the study population was not using any method of contraception and that 8% of the study population had been sterilised. Of those

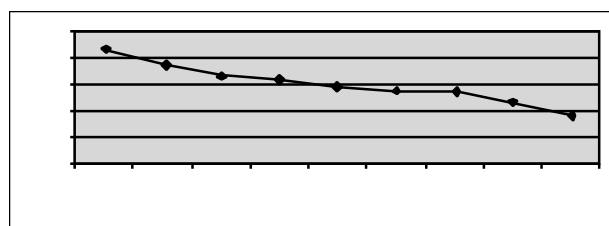


Fig. 1. Age at first intercourse by age cohort.

who reported currently using a method of contraception (9 171 women), 55% were using injectable contraceptives. Of interest is the very low rate of use of barrier methods, namely 0.5% of the total sample and 1% of the women who reported using contraception. Data were collected in the late 1990s, after initiation of condom promotion programmes.

Data on the age of first intercourse were also collected and in Fig. 1 the average age of first intercourse by 5-year age cohorts is presented. Women in the age cohort 20 - 25 years reported having sexual intercourse for the first time at an average age of 16.8 years compared with women in the age cohort 60 plus who were on average 19.3 years of age at the time of first sexual intercourse. These data indicate that there has been a steady decrease in the average age at first intercourse, with a decrease of $2^{1/2}$ years over the past 40 years.

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Table I. Contraceptive prevalence

Method	Number	Percentage
None	10 690	53.8
Injectable	5 028	25.3
Pill	1 835	9.2
Sterilisation	1 594	8.0
IUCD	176	0.9
Barrier	104	0.5
Other	434	2.2
Total	19 861	100

IUCD = intra-uterine contraceptive device.
Data on contraceptive use missing for 742 women.