# UK university students use condoms less amid rising STI concerns



Sexual discourse at university is a dynamic and complex subject, intricately woven into the fabric of student life. Conversations around who is engaging in sexual activity, with whom, and where are frequent. Yet, beneath this lively dialogue lies a troubling trend regarding the usage of condoms, particularly amongst students in the UK. Recent surveys reveal a significant decline in condom use, with far-reaching implications for sexual health and wellbeing.

Durex's 2024 Global Sex Survey has painted a stark picture: only 15% of participants indicated they purchased condoms over the past year. This represents an all-time low for the product amid a backdrop of shifting attitudes surrounding sexual health and responsibility. Several contributing factors shape this trend, from the perception of condom usage as detrimental to pleasure, to a lack of awareness surrounding sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Alarmingly, this decline is not an isolated phenomenon; according to a WHO study, rates of condom usage during sexual encounters among adolescents in Europe dropped from 70% to 61% for boys, and from 63% to 57% for girls between 2014 and 2022.

The implications of these statistics are significant. The decrease in condom use coincides with rising rates of STIs and unintended pregnancies across Europe, highlighting a concerning trajectory that demands urgent attention. As Anne Limon Duparcmeur, a college nurse at Gonville & Caius, notes, the conversation surrounding protection often falters not due to ignorance of risks, but because of emotional barriers. Students report feelings of inadequacy when discussing protection, often feeling that initiating such conversations may disrupt the moment. Anne states, “It’s about feeling able to pause and say something – and that takes emotional confidence.”

This challenge is compounded by societal norms that have long conditioned some individuals to prioritise their partner’s desires over their own safety. Lucy, a university student, recounts an intimate experience in which her partner preferred to discard a condom, leaving her feeling guilty for asserting her need for protection. This raises broader questions about dynamics in sexual relationships, particularly the ingrained societal notion that women should please men, thereby complicating the negotiation around safer sex practices.

Ellie shares a different perspective, one shaped by positive experiences in a long-term relationship where trust mitigated her perceived need for condoms. For her, the conversations about protection were more relatable and less daunting. “It’s clumsy and awkward,” she claims, yet this underpinning awareness can foster openness in relationships. However, the reality is that not all students navigate their sexual lives with the same confidence. Elena’s experience illustrates how alcohol can further cloud judgment, leading to decisions that may compromise health.

Compounding these individual experiences is a systemic issue: the structural and educational framework around sexual health. The WHO’s findings emphasise the necessity for comprehensive sexual education to address these gaps in knowledge and confidence. As a representative from Cambridge University for Reproductive Rights argues, the stigma surrounding STIs also contributes to the failure of important conversations. Until society sheds the shame associated with these conditions, students may remain hesitant to discuss their sexual health and wellbeing.

In conclusion, addressing the decline in condom use among students necessitates a multifaceted approach that transcends mere educational measures. It calls for fostering an environment where open communication around sexual health is not only encouraged but is seen as a fundamental aspect of intimacy. As Anne succinctly captures, “The decision to use a condom starts way before you get to bed. It starts with feeling like your voice matters.” Only through nurturing emotional safety and mutual respect in sexual encounters can we hope to reverse this troubling trend and promote healthier sexual practices.

Names have been changed for privacy reasons.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1-3: Sources [[1]](https://www.varsity.co.uk/features/29670), [[2]](https://www.who.int/europe/news/item/29-08-2024-alarming-decline-in-adolescent-condom-use--increased-risk-of-sexually-transmitted-infections-and-unintended-pregnancies--reveals-new-who-report), [[3]](https://www.womenshealthmag.com/uk/health/sexual-health/a62067804/only-15-of-brits-bought-condoms-in-the-last-year/), [[4]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/aug/29/young-peoples-health-at-risk-from-fall-in-condom-use-warns-who)
2. Paragraphs 4-5: Sources [[1]](https://www.varsity.co.uk/features/29670), [[2]](https://www.who.int/europe/news/item/29-08-2024-alarming-decline-in-adolescent-condom-use--increased-risk-of-sexually-transmitted-infections-and-unintended-pregnancies--reveals-new-who-report), [[4]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/aug/29/young-peoples-health-at-risk-from-fall-in-condom-use-warns-who), [[5]](https://www.euronews.com/health/2024/08/30/over-a-third-of-teen-boys-in-europe-now-shun-condoms-amid-worringly-high-rates-of-unprotec)
3. Paragraphs 6-8: Sources [[1]](https://www.varsity.co.uk/features/29670), [[4]](https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/aug/29/young-peoples-health-at-risk-from-fall-in-condom-use-warns-who), [[6]](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/health/article/2024/08/29/fewer-teenagers-are-using-condoms_6723292_14.html), [[7]](https://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/condom-use-decline-fueled-sex-ed-resistance-europe-2024a1000g0r)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.varsity.co.uk/features/29670> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.who.int/europe/news/item/29-08-2024-alarming-decline-in-adolescent-condom-use--increased-risk-of-sexually-transmitted-infections-and-unintended-pregnancies--reveals-new-who-report> - A WHO report reveals a significant decline in condom use among sexually active adolescents in Europe between 2014 and 2022, with usage dropping from 70% to 61% among boys and from 63% to 57% among girls. This trend increases the risk of sexually transmitted infections and unintended pregnancies. The report emphasizes the need for comprehensive sexuality education and accessible contraceptive methods to address these concerns.
3. <https://www.womenshealthmag.com/uk/health/sexual-health/a62067804/only-15-of-brits-bought-condoms-in-the-last-year/> - According to Durex's 2024 Global Sex Survey, only 15% of Brits purchased condoms in the last year, marking a new low in condom use. The survey highlights that 16% of sexually active UK adults avoid buying condoms due to perceived lack of sensation, and 13% feel that condoms kill the mood. Additionally, only 11% of those who purchase condoms always use them.
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/aug/29/young-peoples-health-at-risk-from-fall-in-condom-use-warns-who> - The Guardian reports on a WHO study indicating a decline in condom use among adolescents in Europe, with usage dropping from 70% to 61% among boys and from 63% to 57% among girls between 2014 and 2022. The article discusses the implications of this trend, including increased risks of sexually transmitted infections and unintended pregnancies, and calls for improved sexual education and access to contraception.
5. <https://www.euronews.com/health/2024/08/30/over-a-third-of-teen-boys-in-europe-now-shun-condoms-amid-worringly-high-rates-of-unprotec> - Euronews reports on a WHO study revealing a significant decline in condom use among sexually active adolescents in Europe between 2014 and 2022. The proportion of boys using condoms during their last sexual encounter fell from 70% to 61%, and for girls, from 63% to 57%. The article highlights the risks associated with this trend and the need for comprehensive sex education.
6. <https://www.lemonde.fr/en/health/article/2024/08/29/fewer-teenagers-are-using-condoms_6723292_14.html> - Le Monde reports on a WHO study showing a decline in condom use among adolescents across Europe, Central Asia, and Canada. Between 2014 and 2022, condom usage during the last sexual encounter decreased from 70% to 61% in boys and from 63% to 57% in girls aged 15. The article discusses the implications of this trend and the need for comprehensive sex education.
7. <https://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/condom-use-decline-fueled-sex-ed-resistance-europe-2024a1000g0r> - Medscape discusses a WHO report highlighting a decline in condom use among adolescents in Europe, with usage dropping from 70% to 61% among boys and from 63% to 57% among girls between 2014 and 2022. The article explores potential factors contributing to this trend, including resistance to comprehensive sex education, and emphasizes the need for improved sexual education and access to contraception.