

Sexual Health in The Netherlands 2017: Summary

Sexual Health in the Netherlands 2017 is a large-scale representative study of the sexual health of adults aged 18 to 80 years in the Netherlands. Rutgers has conducted this periodical study three times before. In 2017, this study was part of the Lifestyle Monitor for the first time (Sexual Health in the Netherlands/Lifestyle Monitor: Rutgers in partnership with the Dutch National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM), 2017). It was also the first time that this study among adults was carried out together with the study Sex under the age of 25 (among young people) (Sex under the age of 25/Lifestyle Monitor, Rutgers/STI Aids The Netherlands in partnership with the Dutch National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM), 2017).

In the study Sex under the age of 25, 15 of the 25 regional public health services in the Netherlands used the opportunity to gain insight into the sexual health of young people in their own region by increasing the sample for their region. Because the young people aged 18 and older in this study also took part in Sexual Health in the Netherlands, this had an impact on the number of adults who participated. Over 17,000 people aged 18 to 80 years completed a questionnaire about a wide range of sexuality-related topics. A weighting procedure was used to compile a sample that was representative of the Dutch population. The results show the current state of sexual health in the Netherlands.

Positive experience of sexuality

Most Dutch people are happy with their partner, satisfied with their appearance and satisfied with the quality of their sex lives. If they are not satisfied, it is because of how often they have sex: a quarter of men and one in five women are (very) dissatisfied with their frequency of sex. Men experience more positive emotions with regard to sex than women. For example, 92% of men and 75% of women say they enjoy sex very much. Among young people aged up to 25 years, the differences between men and women in their experience of sexuality are smaller. There are also aspects of experience where the differences between men and women are strikingly small. For instance, women as well as men have sex both out of love and out of lust.

Attitudes generally progressive

Attitudes towards sexuality are predominantly progressive in the Netherlands: a small minority think sex before marriage or masturbation are wrong. Dutch people also have a positive attitude towards sexuality education in schools. Nine out of ten people think that it should be compulsory. For a number of themes,

however, attitudes are more ambiguous. For example, in principle almost no one thinks that sexual assault is usually provoked by the victim, but different standards are applied to online sexual harassment. One in three men and one in four women think that a nude picture online is one's own fault. And although a majority of men (71%) and women (80%) think homosexuality is normal, 25% of homosexual and bisexual men and 15% of lesbian and bisexual women have been verbally abused in the past year.

Sexual behaviour with a partner

Almost everyone has sex with a partner at some point in their life. About one in twenty people aged over 25 have not had that experience. Three quarters of adult Dutch people have had sex with a partner in the past half year. For 86% of men and 90% of women in this group this was a steady partner. Dutch people have a varied and equal repertoire of sexual behaviour. For example, giving and receiving manual and oral sex are both equally common. Five out of six people aged over 25 do not have sex more often than three times a month. Thus, most couples do not achieve the often-mentioned average of "twice a week".

Solo sex

Most men and women have masturbated in the past 6 months, but this group is considerably larger among men (84%) than among women (67%). Men also masturbate more often than women: 40% of men do it every week, compared to 14% of women. Men watch porn more often than women. 71% of men have watched porn in the past 6 months, for women this is 29%. For most people, watching porn does not replace or hinder sex with a partner. In fact, people who watch porn more often also have sex with a partner more often.

Elderly people less sexually active

Sexual activity (both solo and with a partner) decreases with age. Of the people aged 25 to 39 years, 85% have had sex with a partner in the past half year. Among people aged over 70, this is 51%. Apart from age, this mainly depends on whether one has a partner or not. Of the people aged over 70 who have a partner, 62% have had sex in the past half year.

Singles active in sexting and dating

Sexting (making and sending personal nude pictures or sex videos) and meeting up and having sex via dating apps are most common among 18- to 24-year-olds and among people without a steady relationship. If we only take people without a steady relationship into account, however, it turns out that people aged 25 to 39 years engage in sexting and online dating at least as often. For instance, among

the group of singles, 22% of men and 15% of women have had sex with someone they had met through a dating app in the past half year. That is more than among singles aged under 25 years. People without a partner also have more different sex partners (across their lifetime and recently) than people with a partner.

Homosexual, lesbian and bisexual people

Around 4% of men and women feel equally, predominantly or exclusively attracted to members of the same sex. In many respects, these people do not differ from heterosexual people. For example, we find no differences in frequency of sex, positive sexual emotions, sexual self-confidence, ease of talking about sex, sexual problems and body image. However, there are differences too. For instance, homosexual, bisexual and lesbian people engage more in online dating than heterosexual people. In addition, homosexual and bisexual men have more experience of sexting, sexual coercion and paid sex than heterosexual men.

High use of contraception

The use of contraception in the Netherlands is high. The contraceptive pill has been the most used contraceptive method in the Netherlands for years (30%). It is used especially by young women: 63% of sexually active women aged 18 to 24 take the pill. Among older women, the popularity of IUDs has increased: 18% of women aged 40 to 49 years use an IUD.

Still unplanned pregnancies

Despite the high use of contraceptives, 8% of women aged 18 to 49 years are at risk of an unplanned pregnancy, because they have sexual intercourse, do not use contraception, are fertile, and are not pregnant or do not want to become pregnant. Three per cent of women and men have experienced an unplanned pregnancy in the past year. Part of these pregnancies are unwanted (for 1.7% of women and 0.4% of men). Notably, two out of five people who experienced an unwanted pregnancy indicate that contraception had been used. The majority of these people indicate that the contraceptive method had not always been used or that something went wrong when using it. This means that women who use contraception can also be at risk of unplanned pregnancy.

(Protection against) STIs and/or HIV

Condoms are often not used with one's most recent sex partner, even when this is a one-night-stand or casual partner. Among the group of people whose most recent sex partner was a one-night-stand, 42% of men and 55% of women did not

use a condom with this partner. Condom use decreases with age and is lower among people with a steady partner. In long-term relationships, around one in three choose to use condoms at the beginning and stop doing so after a short or long period of time. In this group, eight out of ten people indicate that both they and their partner had not been tested for STIs when they took this decision. One in three women and a quarter of men have ever been tested for STIs in their lifetime. Around half of this group were tested by their GP. The other half visited an STI clinic or the hospital.

Sexual violence and coercion

Twenty-two per cent of women and 6% of men have experienced manual, oral, vaginal or anal sex against their will and/or have been forced to do sexual things they did not want. If kissing and touching in a sexual way against one's will are included, the percentage is much higher still, namely 53% of women and 19% of men. Five per cent of women and 2% of men experienced sexual violence before the age of 12. Eleven per cent of women have ever had sexual intercourse against their will, compared to 1% of men.

Consequences of sexual violence

Experiencing sexual violence has drastic consequences for a considerable number of victims. Almost half of men and more than half of women report that they suffer from complaints or problems as a result of experiencing sexual violence. This mainly concerns mental, sexual and relationship problems. People who have experienced sexual violence also have worse mental health. Given the extent of the problem and the consequences it has for victims, prevention of sexual violence and sexual coercion is of crucial importance.

Sexual problems

Eleven per cent of men and 15% of women have at least one sexual problem that occurs often or always and that causes considerable or very much distress. Among men, erection problems (6%) and premature ejaculation (3%) are most common. Among women, problems mainly concern subjective sexual desire (7%), vaginal dryness (6%), pain (5%) and orgasm (4%). Among men, sexual problems are most common among those aged over 70, whereas sexual problems among women are most common under the age of 25. For both these groups this is 21%.

Sex and health

Physical health is an important predictor of sexual behaviour and sexual problems. How often people have sex correlates most strongly with how healthy

they are. The chance of a sexual problem is around twice as high if someone has a chronic illness or condition and/or takes medication for it.

Insight into changes in four years' time

Because of the integration of Sexual Health in the Netherlands into the Lifestyle Monitor, we were able to use a random sample drawn by Statistics Netherlands (CBS) from the person population registers (BRP) for the first time in 2017. For the studies of 2006, 2009 and 2012 we used an online panel. A sample from the municipal population registers entails a huge improvement in the quality of the study. However, the change in recruitment method also means it is impossible to compare the results with earlier measurements. In the next edition of Sexual Health in the Netherlands, in four years' time, we will be able to discuss changes over time.