

**Sexual and reproductive health of female university students in the health field****Saúde sexual e reprodutiva de universitárias da área da saúde****Salud sexual y reproductiva de universitarias del área de salud**

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**Objective:** to identify issues related to the sexual and reproductive health of female university students in the health field. **Methods:** quantitative study; cross-sectional; exploratory and non-experimental with academics from all undergraduate health courses at a public university. **Results:** 95 students from Nursing, Physical Therapy, Medicine, Nutrition and Biomedicine courses participated. The average age was 26 years old; 93.7% had already had sexual intercourse and did not have children; 54.7% go to a gynecological consultation once a year; 76.8% have the pap smear test; 48.4% reported using the contraceptive pill and 20% using male condoms; 29.4% reported candidiasis and 7.3% bacterial vaginosis. **Conclusion:** the knowledge acquired during graduation can be influential in caring for the sexual and reproductive lives of the students analysed.

**Descriptors:** Women's health; Students; Sexual health.

**Objetivo:** identificar questões relacionadas à saúde sexual e reprodutiva de universitárias da área da saúde. **Método:** estudo quantitativo; transversal; exploratório e não experimental com acadêmicas de todos os cursos de graduação da área da saúde de uma universidade pública. **Resultados:** participaram 95 acadêmicas dos cursos de Enfermagem, Fisioterapia, Medicina, Nutrição e Biomedicina. A média de idade foi de 26 anos; 93,7% já tiveram relação sexual e não tinham filhos; 54,7% vão em consulta ginecológica uma vez ao ano; realizam o exame de papanicolaou em 76,8% delas; 48,4% afirmou uso da pílula anticoncepcional e 20% uso de preservativo masculino; 29,4% relataram candidíase e 7,3% vaginose bacteriana. **Conclusão:** os conhecimentos adquiridos durante a graduação podem ser influenciadores no cuidado na vida sexual e reprodutiva das acadêmicas pesquisadas.

**Descritores:** Saúde da mulher; Estudantes; Saúde sexual.

**Objetivo:** identificar cuestiones relacionadas a la salud sexual y reproductiva entre estudiantes universitarias del área de salud. **Método:** estudio cuantitativo, transversal, exploratorio y no experimental con estudiantes de todos los cursos de pregrado de una universidad pública. **Resultados:** participaron 95 estudiantes de los siguientes cursos: Enfermería, Fisioterapia, Medicina, Nutrición y Biomedicina. La edad media fue de 26 años; el 93,7% ya había tenido relaciones sexuales y no tenía hijos; el 54,7% acudía a consulta ginecológica una vez al año; el 76,8% se había realizado una citología; el 48,4% afirmaba utilizar la píldora anticonceptiva y el 20% el preservativo masculino; el 29,4% declaraba tener candidiasis y el 7,3% vaginosis bacteriana. **Conclusión:** los conocimientos adquiridos durante los estudios de pregrado pueden influir en la vida sexual y reproductiva de las estudiantes encuestadas.

**Descriptores:** Salud de la mujer; Estudiantes; Salud sexual.

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## INTRODUCTION

In today's society, great advances in health programs aimed at women are notable. Given this, greater access to health and information is expected to alleviate inequalities in living conditions and relationships between men and women, especially in factors associated with sexuality, reproduction, difficulties related to contraception and prevention of sexually transmitted infections (STIs)<sup>1</sup>.

Cultural and socioeconomic differences directly interfere with the search for care and information, leading to a large number of avoidable diseases<sup>1</sup>. Many women do not realize the vulnerability linked to sexual relations without condoms, since they think they will not be contaminated and because they are in a stable relationship, which presupposes mutual sexual exclusivity<sup>2-3</sup>.

In Brazil, countless women do not have family planning and this leads to unwanted pregnancies, triggering high rates of induced abortions and high levels of mortality among women in the reproductive age<sup>4</sup>. This is due to the lack of contraceptive methods, which may be directly linked to misinformation, religiosity and lack of medical consultations<sup>4</sup>.

The format of culture can generate taboos related to sexual education, which in the case of health students can interfere with their own training and professional performance<sup>5</sup>. Lack of knowledge is not the main cause of interference in the health of students, but rather neglect of persistent care, such as the use of condoms in all sexual relations, correct use of contraceptives and periodic gynecological consultations. All of these aspects lead this age group to the greatest number of vulnerabilities, since the majority are single, but have an active sex life and casual partners<sup>6</sup>.

A study of college students found that 76% were sexually active; however, only 43.1% used condoms in all sexual relations<sup>6</sup>. Considering the increase in the number of STIs, and the risk of unplanned pregnancy, condom use should be frequent and responsible. Pregnancy occurring at the time of university education can be an obstacle, with the postponement of goals<sup>7</sup>.

It is extremely important to address sexual and reproductive health in universities and especially in undergraduate health courses, despite having access to information, in itself, a topic that may require reflection and review of practices by young people to avoid future injuries.

Health academics develop and have the opportunity to acquire more knowledge during their degree, compared to other young women of the same age, so they are expected to apply this knowledge related to caring for their own health and also to care for other women, as

students and future health professionals. The present study aimed to identify issues related to sexual and reproductive health among university students in the health field.

## METHODS

This is a quantitative study; cross-sectional and exploratory carried out with undergraduate students from health courses at a public university, in the interior of the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil. This university has 27 courses in different areas, and among them, 07 are health courses.

The inclusion criteria for participation in the study were: undergraduate students. The exclusion criteria were: students under 18 years of age.

An instrument in the form of a questionnaire was used, with questions regarding sociodemographic, economic, behavioral, gynecological, obstetric and sexual conditions. The variables used were: the frequency of visits to the gynecologist; and, about the performance, frequency and difficulties of the Pap smear test.

Academics from the university's various courses were invited via social media, WhatsApp and email to participate in the study. Those who were interested responded to a questionnaire available at a specific email address, through a link. In this link, the students were informed about the nature and objectives of the research. Data collection was carried out using a self-administered, online instrument, with the consent and authorization of the participants. The period was from January to February 2023.

The data were later imported into an electronic spreadsheet using the EXCEL program. Statistical analysis was carried out using specific software. Univariate data analysis was used, which were presented in the form of distribution of absolute (n) and relative (%) frequencies for the qualitative variables.

Participation in the study was conditional on consent through the Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF). The research project was submitted and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Universidade Federal do Triângulo Mineiro – CAAE: 59753522.0.0000.5154 and opinion number: 5.840.190. Participants were assured of anonymity, privacy and the right to refuse to participate or withdraw their consent at any stage of the research, without prejudice to the academic period.

## RESULTS

95 students from the following courses participated in the study: Nursing, Physical Therapy, Medicine, Nutrition and Biomedicine. The average age of the participants was 26 years old. The course that contributed most to the study was Nursing, representing 37.9%. The majority of students were single and carried out physical and leisure activities. They reported that no chronic illnesses or smoking habit. However, only 17.9% do not have the habit of drinking alcoholic beverages. With regard to drug use, a little more than half (55.8%) have never used drugs and 24.2% have used them and no longer use them.

In relation to emotional, sexual and gynecological life, 93.7% had already had sexual intercourse and the majority did not have children. With a predominance of 54.7%, who go to a gynecological consultation once a year. It is noteworthy that 4.2% never went to a gynecologist. In relation to gynecological consultations, 62.1% of students used health insurance or private consultation.

Among the 95 participants, 63 of them (66.3%) reported having a pap smear. Among these, 68.25% take the exam annually, 14.28% every 2 years, 3.17% more than once a year and 19.04% take it only once. According to the participants, 69.5% did not find it difficult to do so. Among those who stated they had difficulties, some of the reasons were: discomfort (48.27%), shame (27.58%), not finding a place that performs it (17.24%), pain (10.34%) and other reasons (6.89%). The biggest difficulty encountered in accessing the health service was scheduling an appointment, with 61.1% of responses.

With regard to the use of contraceptives, 76.8% said they use them, with the contraceptive pill being the most reported (48.4%) and the male condom second (20%). The women chose the method for safety and effectiveness (44.2%). Regarding the place of acquisition of contraceptive methods (MAC's), the pharmacy predominated.

Regarding STIs in the last year, five of the university students had some type of infection, including Herpes and other diseases. In diseases not considered STIs, but rather endogenous infections, 29.4% reported candidiasis and 7.3% bacterial vaginosis. In STIs, 80.0% of those surveyed who had a disease underwent treatment. And, regarding candidiasis and bacterial vaginosis, 32.6% underwent treatment.

Of the participants, 82.1% of them said that because they studied health courses, they were more careful with their sexual and reproductive life.

## DISCUSSION

In this study, single women were found; average age of 26 years; of which 61.1% performed physical activity and 80% performed regular leisure activities. Only 17.9% did not drink alcoholic beverages. This data drew attention, given the large number of young people who tend to drink alcohol during their academic years. Although the study does not identify the frequency of this consumption, it is believed that entering university increases the level of use, since they are far from family members. It is considered that excessive use can lead to low academic performance<sup>8</sup>.

In addition to the indiscriminate use of alcohol not being biologically healthy, it can facilitate a risk situation for female sexual health, such as the irregular use of condoms, leading to a higher incidence of unprotected relationships, the beginning of early sexual activity and contamination by STIs<sup>9</sup>.

76.8% used a contraceptive method. However, the most used methods was the contraceptive pill, which does not prevent STIs, only pregnancy. The use of male condoms, in addition to preventing unwanted pregnancy, also prevents diseases. A study carried out at a university in Rio de Janeiro showed that 75% used condoms only during their first sexual intercourse. The male condom is the contraceptive method most used by young people, seeking to prevent both pregnancy and STIs<sup>6</sup>.

Another study showed that among young students, 25.5% do not always have safe sexual practices, and they do not use condoms in every relationship<sup>10</sup>, which is similar to the 20% of academics who said they use the male condom as a contraceptive.

Women have autonomy in choosing a contraceptive method, leading to greater self-knowledge and appreciation of individual choices when it comes to family planning and avoiding unwanted pregnancies<sup>11</sup>.

Regarding gynecological consultations, it is known that it is an action that promotes the sexual and reproductive health of young people, available free of charge in primary health care and, despite this, its demand is still low. In the present study, the researchers sought care in a private network (62.1%). In a study carried out in 2022, it was identified that there is a drop in returns and having supplementary healthcare influences services provided by the SUS<sup>9,12-13</sup>.

During a gynecological consultation, it is possible to discuss the adoption of behaviors that promote a healthy experience of sexuality and intensify information in the lives of future health professionals<sup>7</sup>. In another study, it was found that women with a steady partner find it easier to make appointments<sup>12</sup>.

The institution under study has the Student Health Assistance Center (*Núcleo de Assistência Estudantil em Saúde - NAES*), which provides medical care of all specialties to all students, which facilitates access to care, including gynecological care and pap smear testing.

It is known that the main way to prevent cervical cancer is through cytopathological examination (pap smear), which allows the identification of precursor lesions. It is a fact that behavioral actions can minimize the risks of exposure, one of which may be information about the frequency of exams, with 66.3% already taking the exam and 45.3% taking it annually, which is only necessary if there is any change in the exam, since, according to the recommendation of the Brazilian Ministry of Health, after two consecutive normal results, the exam should be carried out every 3 years<sup>1,13</sup>.

In a study carried out in Belém, in the state of Pará, on adherence to the cervical cancer prevention exam, among university students, almost half of the students mentioned that they did not frequently take the exam, with difficulty scheduling appointments being the main reason<sup>14</sup>, a fact also mentioned in the present study. Also, taking the exam was more popular the more advanced the course was<sup>14</sup>. Therefore, it appears that as the years pass within the university, more knowledge is acquired and greater maturity and individual responsibility in caring for one's own health.

In another work carried out with students from health courses at a university center, the reasons given by women for not taking the pap smear were: not knowing the reason (48.3%), carelessness on their part (16.4%) and the lack of request from the health professional (9.6%).

According to this research, 88.4% of young women did not contract an STI in the last year, which confirms the influence of condom use and sexual health care. With regard to STIs, 63.2% did not present any. When considering endogenous infections, not STIs, 29.5% had candidiasis and 7.4% bacterial vaginosis. The rate of those who did not receive treatment was 13.3%. Although the study shows that the number of infections was low, global rates cannot be discarded, which highlight high numbers<sup>15</sup>. It should also be considered that some STIs are asymptomatic. The fact that some participants did not adhere to the gynecological consultation and the pap smear (considering the microbiological analysis for some infections) suggests that the number of STIs may be higher than that identified in the research.

Even though the majority of university students are single and have sporadic relationships and casual encounters, it is possible to note that knowledge acquired during graduation makes a difference, as even with an active sexual life, studies prove a low rate of STI contamination in this group of women<sup>6</sup>.

Women are more attentive to issues related to their health, as they are able to access numerous information more quickly<sup>4</sup>. And considering those who experience the academic environment, this knowledge is enhanced by greater ease of acquiring information in an updated and correct way.

The knowledge acquired during graduation is important for these women, as they directly affect their quality of life and their ability to transmit knowledge in their future profession. The privilege of having unlimited access to information during training can bring direct benefits and help improve women's health.

## CONCLUSION

The majority of university students participating in the study sought gynecological care, used contraceptives, underwent a pap smear, did not have/noticed the presence of STIs and underwent treatment for them.

The use of the male condom and the contraceptive pill are the most used contraceptive methods. Concern was identified with sexual and reproductive health, as they carry out gynecological consultations and preventive examinations for cervical cancer, in addition to the use of contraceptives to avoid unplanned pregnancies. These actions are considered important for a healthy and planned sexual and reproductive life.

It is believed that the participants, as they are on undergraduate courses in the health area, have access to a large percentage of information, which helps with care, corroborating their future professional career.

The limitations found in this study were: it was a cross-sectional and descriptive study; participation of academics from just one university and specifically from undergraduate courses in the health area. Further work with other groups of university students on sexual and reproductive health is suggested. In turn, this work contributes to understanding the sexual and reproductive care of female health students, which can allow educational interventions aimed at this public and, as well as studies in other university institutions.

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**Júlia Camila Albino** contributed to the design, data collection and analysis and writing. **Bibiane Dias Miranda Parreira** participated in design, data analysis, writing and revision. **Ana Rita Marinho Machado** contributed to the revision of the manuscript.

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