

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Self-Reported Sexually Transmitted Infections and Sexual Risk Behaviors in the US Military: How Sex Influences Risk

Stahlman, S., Javanbakht, M., Cochran, S., Hamilton, A. B., Shoptaw, S., & Gorbach, P. M. (2014). Self-reported sexually transmitted infections and sexual risk behaviors in the US Military: How sex influences risk. *Sexually Transmitted Diseases*, 41(6), 359-364. doi:10.1097/olq.000000000000133

SUMMARY: A random sample of 10,250 Active Duty U.S. Military personnel who were single and sexually active were used to identify risk factors for self-reported sexually transmitted infection (STI) within the past 12 months. Results indicate that factors associated with reports of increased sexual partnership and reports of an STI differed by gender.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Binge drinking, illicit substance use, and unwanted sexual contact were associated with increased reports of the number of sexual partners in the previous 12 months.
- The prevalence of binge drinking, substance use, and multiple sex partners was higher among men compared to women; women had higher reported prevalence of sexually transmitted infection, unwanted sexual contact, lack of condom use in last sexual encounter, and several mental health indicators.
- For men, illicit substance use and unwanted sexual contact were significantly associated with reports of a sexually transmitted infection in the past 12 months.
- Screening positive for any mental health indicator was significantly associated with report of a sexually transmitted infection only among men; screening positive for distress or reporting high family/personal life stress was associated with report of higher numbers of sexual partners among women.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide education about avoiding the transmission of sexually transmitted infection to military spouses and Service members
- Offer referrals for confidential testing of sexually transmitted infections support for people who have experienced unwanted sexual contact
- Educate couples who have a history of trauma before deployment on positive coping skills

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage routine screening of Service members for sexually transmitted infections
- Recommend adapting and testing existing gender-specific interventions for risky sex behaviors and stress among Service members
- Recommend training for community providers to educate them about unique factors that contribute to risky sexual behaviors for military couples

This product is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a grant/cooperative agreement with The University of Minnesota.



Putting Research to Work for Military Families



METHODS

- Existing cross-sectional data from the 2008 DoD Survey of Health Related Behaviors among a stratified random sample of Active Duty military personnel was used; data were obtained in group sessions or via mail survey.
- Participants completed measures of alcohol and drug use, sexual risks/risk behaviors, and mental health.
- Statistical analyses compared characteristics of men and women, and were used to determine which variables were associated with the report of increasing numbers of sexual partners in the previous 12 months.

PARTICIPANTS

- A total of 10,250 sexually active unmarried U.S. Military personnel (67% male) who completed the DoD Survey were included.
- Forty-three percent were age 21-25 years, 27% were 26-34 years, and 18% were 17-20 years. The race/ethnicity of the sample was as follows: 59% White, 16% Black, and 15% Latino/Latina.
- Among the participants, 87% were enlisted, and represented the following service branches: 24% Navy, 22% Army, 22% Air Force, and 20% Marine Corps.

LIMITATIONS

- The data are susceptible to self-reporting bias and worry about potential ramifications of reporting some of these behaviors.
- This was a cross-sectional dataset and causality cannot be established.
- Some variables were prone to measurement error (e.g., condom use, mental health variables), which may have skewed results.
- Female Service members may have been more aware of their sexually transmitted infection status than males as they tend to be routinely screened at a wellness check-up and this may have skewed the results.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Include more information on characteristics of the sexual partners and encounters associated with sexually transmitted infection
- Examine further the relationship between mental health, multiple partnerships and sexually transmitted infection risk specific to women in the military
- Gather longitudinal data about risky sexual behaviors among Service members over time

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:
<https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works>