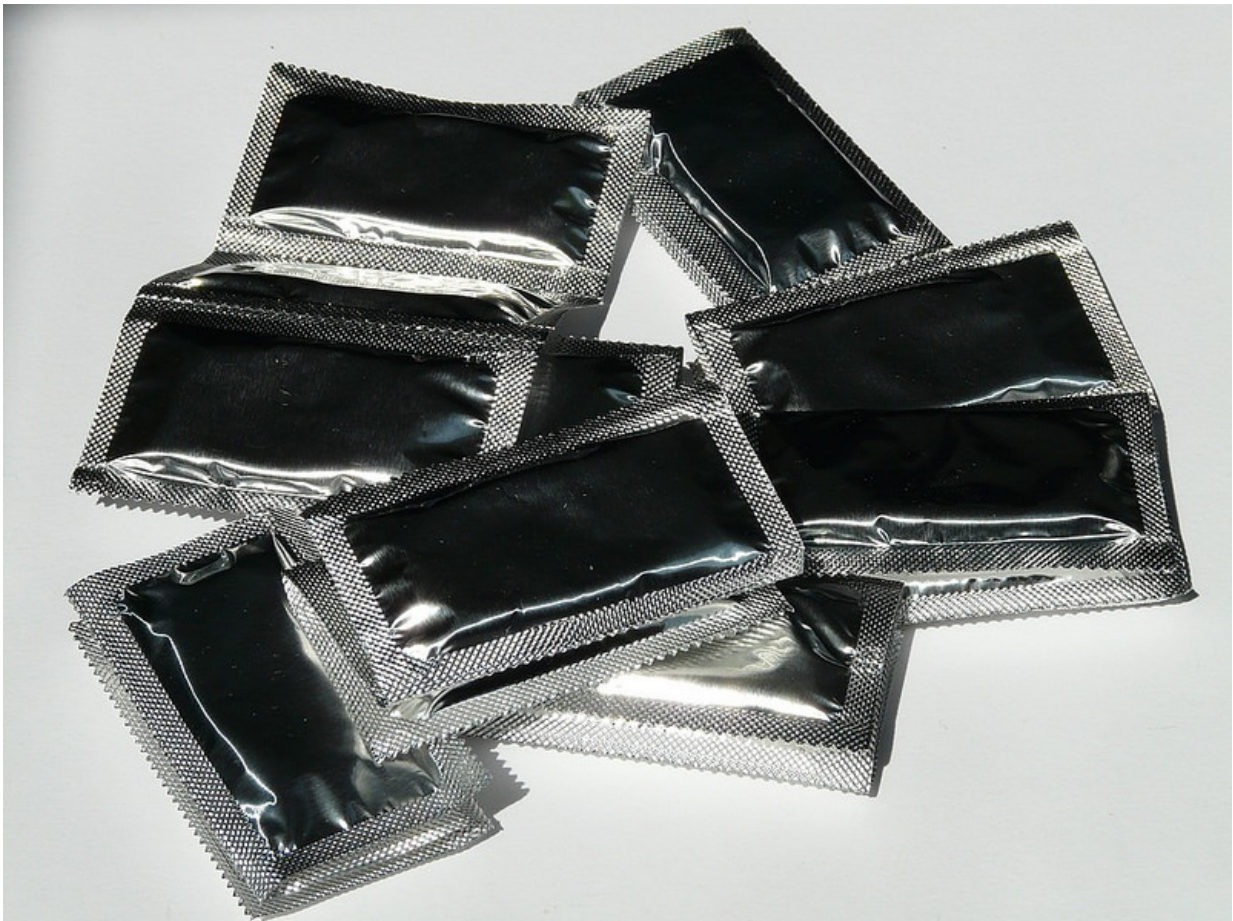


Relationship factors affect young adult use of condoms

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Credit: Oregon State University

The characteristics of a person's relationship, including commitment and

partner-specific risk factors, affect the choice of whether or not to use condoms, according to new research from Oregon State University.

Understanding the reasons that sexual partners use [condoms](#) - for pregnancy prevention, disease prevention, or both - is critical to increasing their use, especially among young adults who are considered most at risk, researchers say.

A recent study, led by S. Marie Harvey, associate dean and professor in the College of Public Health and Human Sciences, was published in *The Journal of Sex Research*. It found that the use of condoms by young adults is often dependent on their specific [sexual partner](#) and characteristics of the partnership.

Condoms are unique in their ability to both protect against [unintended pregnancy](#) and [sexually transmitted infections](#), or STIs. Although their use is important for every demographic, it is especially important for young adults, who have the highest rates of unintended pregnancy and HIV infection of any age group. Other STIs, like chlamydia and gonorrhea, also appear to be increasing for this age group.

The study, supported by the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development, explored the reasons for using condoms, including partner-specific factors such as commitment to the relationship, the perceived risk of getting an STI from a partner, and comfort in discussing and using condoms. Researchers examined the influence of these relationship characteristics and others on condom use among about 450 [young adults](#), aged 18-30, for one year.

Study participants were questioned about their sexual behaviors, relationship characteristics, and reasons for condom use. All were condom users and if they had more than one sexual partner, the same series of questions were repeated for each partnership.

"The partner-specific questions provided unique and critical insight into the role relationships play in decisions about why condoms were used," said co-author Lisa Oakley, a post-doctoral researcher at OSU.

Researchers found that a number of relationship characteristics specific to a partner influenced reasons for condom use, including perceived risk of contracting a STI and confidence in discussing and using condoms with each partner. Although it seems intuitive that reasons for condom use, risk assessment and decision-making would be specific to a particular sexual partner, this is the first study to actually examine and demonstrate that point.

The study also found that 51 percent of the participants used condoms primarily to prevent pregnancy; only 17 percent primarily to prevent the spread of disease; and 33 percent for both birth control and [disease prevention](#). This was of particular interest because condoms are the only widely available way to prevent the spread of sexually-transmitted diseases.

"Overall, people are much more aware of the risk of getting pregnant and often don't perceive themselves as at risk of contracting a sexually-transmitted infection," Harvey said.

"The goal of [public health](#) professionals is to help people lead healthier lives. When it comes to understanding why people use condoms, there is a need to understand the complexity of the partnership and the role relationship factors may play in influencing behavior."

More information: S. Marie Harvey et al. Competing Priorities: Partner-Specific Relationship Characteristics and Motives for Condom Use Among At-Risk Young Adults, *The Journal of Sex Research* (2016). [DOI: 10.1080/00224499.2016.1182961](https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2016.1182961)

Provided by Oregon State University

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