

# What are the effects of substance use on sexual behaviour?

Iona Maxwell, Jennifer Akerman, Dr Rajul Patel (Royal South Hants Hospital), Dr Elizabeth Foley (Royal South Hants Hospital).

## Introduction

Patients attending sexual health services report higher rates of drug and alcohol use than the general population. Substance use may lead to patients ignoring safer sex messages which may put them at greater risk of STIs. Deliberate use of psychoactive substances to enhance sexual pleasure and performance is known as 'chemsex' and has been recognised by BASHH as a risk factor amongst men who have sex with men (MSM), but it is unclear how widespread this phenomenon is amongst the heterosexual population or outside of large conurbations.

## Aims

The main aim of the study was to assess the extent of drug and alcohol use amongst Sexual Health clinic attendees and to examine the impact of this use on sexual behaviour.

A secondary aim was to investigate the difference between the male and female population and the heterosexual and homosexual population.



## Methods

This was a retrospective case note review of 536 consecutive Sexual Health clinic attendees. A questionnaire was devised and handed out to every patient attending in the months of March and April. Once completed, the questionnaires were analysed alongside further data extracted from 'Inform', the patient database.

The questionnaire included questions on substance use and the subjective effect of this on various measures of sexual behaviour, such as regret, quality of partner choice and quality of the sex being had. This was then analysed alongside information extracted from the patient database such as recent STI diagnosis and number of partners.

Data was analysed using SPSS version 22.

## Results

- **MSM are significantly more likely to engage in chemsex than the heterosexual population (19% v 1%)** ( $p < 0.001$ )
- Chemsex amongst MSM was significantly associated with **unprotected sex, more sexual partners** and having had a **recent course of post exposure prophylaxis after sexual exposure (PEPSE)**
- Strong associations were found between **STI diagnosis and drug use** in men ( $p = 0.011$ ) and **STI diagnosis and alcohol use** in women ( $p = 0.010$ )
- Women reported a **NEGATIVE** effect of alcohol on the quality of partner choice, whereas men reported a **POSITIVE** effect
- Women reported a **POSITIVE** effect of alcohol on the quality of sex they were having, whereas men reported a **NEGATIVE** effect
- More males than females reported regretting sex in the last year



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## Limitations

The self-completed questionnaire relied upon full patient disclosure so the amount of substance use declared may be inaccurate and perhaps an underestimate. The study is limited geographically as the results only apply to Southampton and may not be true of other cities. The study only targeted those accessing healthcare so accessing those in the community could be a focus for future studies.

## Conclusions

Chemsex is more prevalent in Southampton amongst MSMs than amongst the heterosexual population (19% v 1% ever engaged in chemsex). However, perhaps this could be the beginning of a new trend amongst heterosexuals – in which case, the population needs to be carefully monitored as an increase in chemsex involvement could lead to a simultaneous explosion in STI rates.

STI rates in men and women were shown to be significantly associated with different substance use – men with drug use and women with alcohol use. This could suggest that future interventions to reduce the burden of STIs should be targeted by gender.