Digital sexual health for young people

SUMMARY

Authors
Julia Bailey, Sue Mann, Sonali Wayal, Rachael Hunter, Caroline Free, Charles Abraham, Elizabeth Murray

This is a summary of the main points of a report on Digital Sexual Health for Young People which will be published in full in 2015. This summary is provisional and not endorsed by the National Institute for Health Research, the NHS or the UK Department of Health.
Young people, sexual health and digital media in the UK

This report has been written by a team of researchers. We summarise of what is known about whether digital interventions work, and how to design them and make them available in schools, clinics or online. We focus on sexual health promotion for young people aged 13 to 24 years in the UK. We are particularly interested in interactive digital interventions, which are programmes that provide sexual health information and personalised help with decision-making, changing behaviour and/or emotional support.

The sexual health of young people

- Relationships and sex are very important to young people
- Young people 15 to 25 are at higher risk of sexually transmitted infection than other age groups
- Many young people are at risk of getting pregnant without wanting to
- Young people can experience problems like regretted sex, sexual pressure and sexual abuse
- Some young people experience more health problems than others (e.g. gay men, children in care, drug-using youth, some ethnic minority groups, transgender young people)
- Problems like sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancy and sexual abuse cost a lot to society and we need new, effective, good-value solutions which appeal to young people

Sexual health information in schools and clinics

- The quality of school sex and relationships education (SRE) in the UK varies enormously
- A full programme of SRE education is not compulsory in UK schools
- Not all schools have good access to digital technology (computers and the Internet)
- It can be hard for young people to access clinics because of distance, opening times, or not feeling welcome
- Asking for help with sexual health problems can be difficult
- Young people would like to get sexual health information and advice from adults (parents, teachers, and clinic staff) but they also want to access it online
- Young people want sexual health education which includes pleasure and relationships, not just biology, safer sex and pregnancy
Digital media and sexual health information

- Digital media such as the Internet and mobile phones are an essential part of young people’s lives in the UK
- Digital media can be useful for topics which are hard to discuss
- There are concerns about young people’s safety online (e.g. grooming, shaming, sexual pressure, bullying)
- Websites and digital health education programmes are generally unregulated, and people are not sure which programmes to trust

Young people in the UK are not getting the sex and relationships education that they need

The Internet and mobile phones are good ways to reach young people
Design and development of digital interventions for sexual health

**Digital media interventions for sexual health**

- There are hundreds of websites for sexual health, but most of these do not give personally relevant advice and information.
- Personally relevant information and advice helps people to remember it, and to think about their own situations.
- Some topics are missing from many sexual health programmes, for example, sexual abuse, alcohol, sexual problems, mental health.
- There are no digital interventions specifically for young people in care, young parents, those with learning difficulties, disabled young people, lesbians, or transgender young people.
- Various interactive and multi-media features have been used for sexual health education e.g. quizzes, games, stories, scenarios, virtual characters, animations, video, bulletin boards, ‘Ask an expert’, outreach on social networking sites, online support groups.

**Digital interventions for sexual health in clinics**

- Some sexual health clinics are using digital systems such as electronic sexual history questions, decision-aids, online test kit ordering, and electronic results or reminders.
- Digital media (especially mobile phones) can be used to remind people to take medication (e.g. HIV treatment or the contraceptive pill).
- Most digital systems linked with health services are designed to help with treatment of health problems rather than promoting better sexual health for the future.
- Clinics could add sexual health promotion to online services such as online appointments or electronic results.

**Digital interventions for sexual health in schools**

- Schools could add sexual health education to online lesson systems (e.g. online homework).
- In schools, digital interventions could be used either with teachers, or later outside the classroom.
- Digital SRE programmes could also contain material for parents and guardians, to encourage discussion at home.
How should digital interventions be designed and developed?

- Young people should be involved in programme design and development at all stages.
- Programmes should give personally relevant feedback, and use psychology to encourage healthier behaviour.
- Programme developers should take into account the views of everyone from the beginning, including for example teachers, parents, clinic staff, managers.
- Programme development teams should include people with different skills, for example young people, researchers, psychologists, software developers, human-computer interaction experts and others.
- Education in using the Internet and media could help to reduce the risks of harm online.
- NHS logos on sexual health resources would increase awareness and public trust.
- Quality and safety kite-marking is needed so that people know that they can trust programmes, and that any data will be kept safely.

Digital interventions which provide personal advice are needed.

Digital interventions for different groups of young people are needed.

Digital interventions could provide sexual health education in schools and clinics.
Do interactive digital interventions for sexual health work?

We added together the results from 19 research experiments which tested interactive digital interventions for sexual health promotion for young people. The experiments (randomised controlled trials) were carried out online and in schools, colleges and health care settings.

- Interactive digital interventions are effective for learning facts about sexual health
- Interactive digital interventions have very small effects on confidence, future intention, and sexual behaviour (e.g. using condoms for safer sex)
- A digital intervention can be as good as a teacher lesson for learning facts about sexual health
- We do not know whether programmes can reduce sexually transmitted infections or unwanted pregnancy
- We do not know how digital interventions work, or what the best designs are
- We do not know whether digital interventions are good value for money
- Digital interventions shown to work in other countries could be tested in the UK
- Health research can be very slow - digital interventions need to be developed and tested more quickly

Interactive digital interventions are good for learning facts about sexual health

We need to understand more about how to change sexual behaviour and improve sexual health
Making digital sexual health interventions available to young people

The success of a digital intervention depends upon how good it is at reaching young people, how good it is at changing behaviour, whether it is adopted by a school or clinic, and how well it is delivered and maintained.

- It can be difficult to keep young people’s attention online
- Digital interventions facilitated by teachers or clinic staff might encourage young people to think about sexual health more deeply
- There are a lot of obstacles to rolling out digital interventions for sexual health in clinics (e.g. access to IT, patterns of providing care, cost)
- There are a lot of obstacles to rolling out digital interventions for sexual health in schools (e.g. access to IT, blocks on sex-related information, patterns of teaching, cost)
- Budgets need to include funds for marketing, maintaining and updating programmes

There are many factors to consider in making sure that young people can access digital interventions
Conclusions

Potential for digital interventions for sexual health

- Young people in the UK need better sex and relationships education
- Interactive digital interventions for sexual health are a great way to learn facts
- Digital interventions can reach large numbers of people relatively cheaply and easily
- At the moment in the UK (in 2014), there are small projects but no national programme to for digital sexual health interventions in clinics, in schools or online
- Commercial companies are keen to develop digital interventions for health, and the UK government supports the idea in principle
- Digital interventions have exciting potential to improve the sexual health of young people

Young people want sex and relationships education via mobile phone and the Internet

Interactive digital interventions are a great way to learn facts

More research is needed on how digital interventions can improve sexual health
Appendix - details about the research methods

Definitions

Sexual health
Sexual health is "a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality...... Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence." (World Health Organisation definition)

Sexual health promotion
Sexual health promotion involves providing individuals, groups and communities with tools to make informed decisions about their sexual wellbeing.

Interactive digital interventions
Digital media includes technology such as the computer and the Internet, mobile phone, compact disc, video, games, and interactive television. Any of these can be used for sexual health education. Interactive digital interventions (IDI) are digital media programmes that provide sexual health information and one or more of: support to make decisions, support to change behaviour, and emotional support for health issues. Programmes must be 'interactive', requiring contributions from users (e.g. entering personal data, making choices) to produce feedback that is personally relevant to users of the programme.

Research design

We collected written studies and asked people’s views on:

- Effectiveness, cost-effectiveness and mechanism of action of interactive digital interventions for sexual health
- Best practice for intervention development
- Contexts for successful implementation of digital interventions for sexual health
- Best research methods for intervention evaluation
- The future potential for sexual health promotion via digital media

We looked for research papers and online discussion forums on digital interventions for sexual health for young people, held focus groups with young people and parents, and interviewed experts in digital media and sexual health. We held a day conference for experts in sexual health and research; and held a day conference for young people. We combined themes from these different sources to write this report.

The research team

The team who led this research are university researchers who are passionate about sexual health education. We think that digital interventions like the Internet and mobile phone are a good way to give everyone access to sex and relationships education. None of the authors have received fees or sponsorship from commercial companies or could profit from the development and implementation of digital interventions.
Funding

This research was funded by the National Institute for Health Research Public Health Research Programme, which is a government research programme. Reference PHR - 11/3009/04
http://www.nets.nihr.ac.uk/projects/phr/11300904

Ethical permission

Research ethical committee permission was from the University College London ethics committee, Reference 2948/002.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all who took part in consultations for this review, including focus group participants (young people, parents and teachers), sexual health and digital media experts and attendees at the Youth Symposium and Expert Meeting. We would also like to thank our sexual health user panel who advised on research materials including the topic guide for focus groups.

The full report is currently under review by the National Institute for Health Research (October 2014) – the findings are therefore provisional and not endorsed by the NIHR or the UK Department of Health.

The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Public Health Research programme, the NIHR, NHS or the Department of Health.

Contact

Dr Julia Bailey
e-Health Unit,
Research Department of Primary Care and Population Health,
University College London, Upper third floor
Royal Free Hospital, Rowland Hill Street,
London NW3 2PF, UK
julia.bailey@ucl.ac.uk
Twitter: @juliavbailey
http://www.ucl.ac.uk/pcph/research-groups-themes/e-health/people

October 2014