

# Meeting on HIV and sexually transmitted infections in a high school in Palermo, Italy

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## Introduction

- Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV remain significant public health concerns worldwide and every day it is estimated over 1 million STIs are acquired<sup>1</sup>. In Italian schools, sex education is not routinely included in the curricula leading to widespread ignorance among students regarding HIV and STIs. This study aims to assess the level of knowledge concerning STIs and HIV among high school students from a school in Palermo.

## Methods

- During World AIDS Day on December 1st, a meeting was organized with students from a high school in Palermo to discuss topics related to HIV and STIs. Before the meeting, a questionnaire comprising 36 closed-ended questions was distributed via Google Forms to assess the students' sexual habits and knowledge of STIs and HIV. The results were summarized by absolute and relative frequencies.

## Results

- A total of 192 Google Forms were collected. The age distribution of the students is depicted in Fig 1. Among respondents 58.6% were male. Most students reported knowing at least 1 IST (Fig 2). 53.4% of the students reported having sexual intercourse, with 27.7% reporting at least one casual intercourse. Of the sexually active students, 53% reported always using a condom before intercourse. Overall, 79.6% responded that the male or female condom is the best method of STI prevention. Thirty students agreed that condoms ruin a couple's intimacy. A few students (5.8%) reported having already experienced an STI. However, almost none of the students (93.7%) had ever had HIV or other STI tests. Regarding HIV infection transmission, 58.6% of students correctly knew how the infection was transmitted (vaginal, anal, rarely oral intercourse, and blood), while 29.3% believed it could also be transmitted with saliva alone. Instead, 14.7% of students did not know that STIs such as gonorrhoea or syphilis could also be transmitted through oral sex.

Most students (96.9%) did not know the meaning of "Undetectable Equal Untransmissible" (U=U), and 54.5% did not know that people living with HIV (PLHIV) can have children without transmitting HIV. A few students (9.4%) harboured stigma towards PLHIV, believing that PLHIV had contracted the infection through their fault as men who have sex with men, drug addicts, or with bad sexual habits. However, 30.7% of students would feel discriminated against if they had HIV. Pre-exposure and post-exposure prophylaxes for HIV are unknown in almost (96.9%). More than half of students would like the HIV test to be mandatory for everyone. Almost all students (95.3%) would like sex education to be studied at school.

## Conclusion

Sex education is crucial in schools because ignorance about HIV, STIs, and prevention contributes to the spread of STIs and fosters stigma towards PLHIV. Initiatives like ours should be encouraged in all Italian high schools, and sexual education should be included as part of the curriculum.

Figure 1. Ages of the students who responded to the form

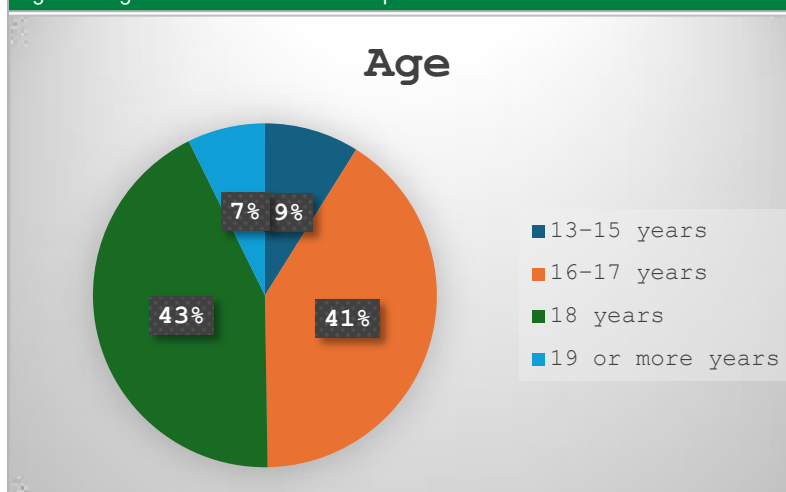
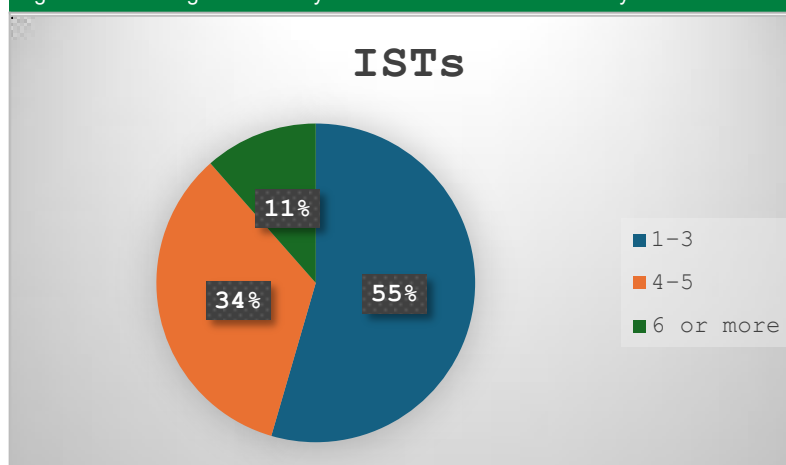


Figure 2 Percentage of sexually transmitted infections known by students



## Reference

- [https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/sexually-transmitted-infections-\(stis\)](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/sexually-transmitted-infections-(stis)) accessed in May 2024