

Knowledge, attitudes, and testing preferences for Herpes Simplex Virus infections among undergraduate students at a large private university in Los Angeles, California

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Background:

Genital herpes is a common STI in the US, yet there is no national herpes prevention and control strategy. Furthermore, there are few recent population-level studies of knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and practices regarding genital herpes. With nearly half of all new herpes infections occurring in young adults, we measured aspects of herpes knowledge among university students.

Methods: In March 2022, an invitation to an anonymous online survey was delivered to 5,000 undergraduate students (of 18,560 total registered students) at a large private university in Los Angeles, California. Participants were asked about: demographic characteristics, history of sexual activity, knowledge and attitudes towards herpes, willingness to test, and preferences for testing and treatment options. Variables were presented as frequencies with percentages or means with standard deviation. Preferences for the hypothetical testing scenarios were determined using a Likert 1-5 scale.

Results:

Of 5,000 invitations, 388 full-time undergraduate students participated in the survey. Participants were ethnically diverse, with 32.3% identifying as Asian/Asian-American heritage and 35.9% identifying as white. The average age of participants was 20.3 years (SD = ±2.0), with 71.7% (278/388) reporting being sexually active. Only 55.0% (153/278) of sexually active students reported ever being tested for an STI. On knowledge questions of genital herpes, only 35.8% (139/388) participants scored >70% correct. On attitude questions, over half of participants disagreed with the notion that they could cope with a genital herpes outbreak (57.0%, 221/388). Most students preferred clinic-based testing (62.4%; 242/388). On treatment, most students reported they would likely take daily suppressive medication if infected with genital herpes (89.4%; 347/388) and would also receive a future herpes vaccine (89.4%; 347/388).

Conclusions: Knowledge regarding genital herpes was low, and the ability to potentially cope with a new diagnosis was moderate. Herpes educational programs are needed to increase sexual health and wellness among undergraduate students.