

Background: The number of new HIV diagnoses is increasing yearly since 1998. Awareness campaigns on the mode of transmission have been undertaken since the late eighties, targeting not only the groups at risk but also the general population. To ensure the success of such prevention campaigns, it is essential to develop a good assessment about people's knowledge on HIV transmission.

Methods: Data from the 2008 Belgian Health Interview Survey (N=7300) were used to study population's knowledge about HIV transmission by gender, age, and educational level. Four indicators were chosen to assess knowledge in the appropriate methods to protect against HIV: having a healthy looking partner, having one faithful, uninfected partner, condom use for each sexual contact and abstinence of penetrative sex, based on the UNAIDS core indicators for evaluation of prevention actions.

Results: Half of the population knows that choosing healthy looking partners does not protect against HIV transmission. The lower the educational level, the lower the knowledge about this mode of transmission: 23% in the lowest educational level. There is no major difference by gender. (Fig 1)

The knowledge is at his highest in the 25 to 44 year old age groups (between 62% and 66%) and is quiet low among those aged 15 to 24 years (44% of the men and 59% of the Women). (Fig. 2)

Fig. 1 : A healthy looking partner does not protect against HIV, by education level and gender, Belgium, 2008

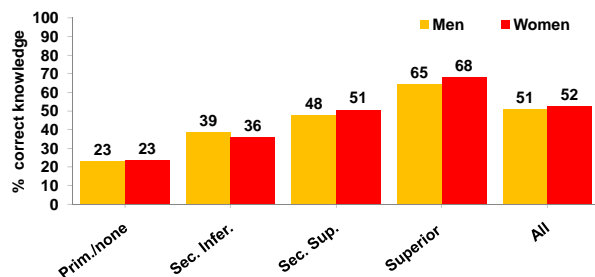
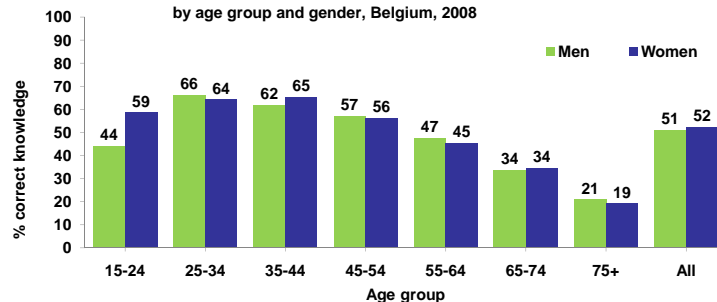


Fig. 2: A healthy looking partner does not protect against HIV, by age group and gender, Belgium, 2008



Less than half of the population is aware that abstaining from penetrative sex protects against HIV transmission. This knowledge is lower among women compared with men. No major differences were found by educational level. (Fig. 3 and 4)

Fig. 3: Abstaining penetrative sex does protect against HIV, by education level and gender, Belgium, 2008

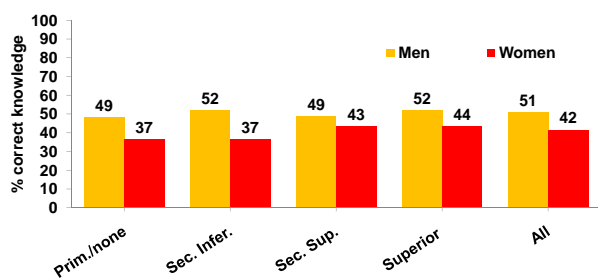
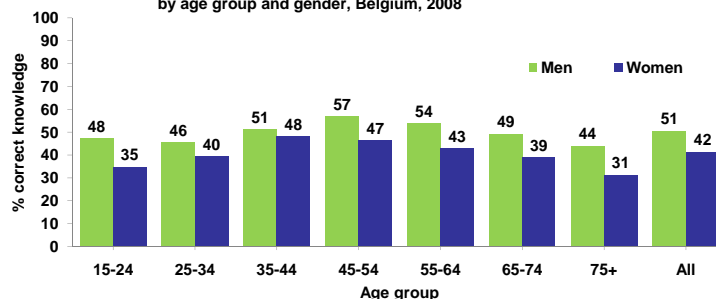


Fig. 4: Abstaining penetrative sex does protect against HIV, by age group and gender, Belgium, 2008



The knowledge on condom use during each sexual contact (fig. 5 and 6) and on having one faithful uninfected partner (fig. 7 and 8) in the protection against HIV transmission is very high reaching respectively 94% and 97%. However, people with the lowest educational level still have a lower knowledge.

Fig. 5: Condom use does protect against HIV, by education level and gender, Belgium, 2008

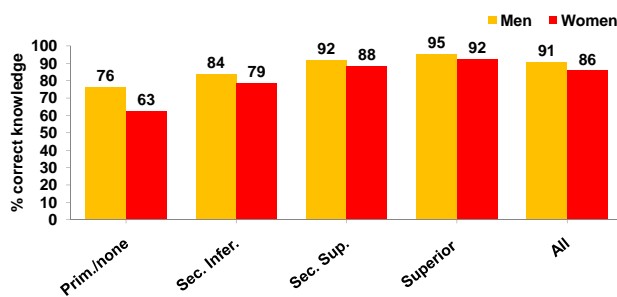


Fig. 6: Condom use does protect against HIV, by age group and gender, Belgium, 2008

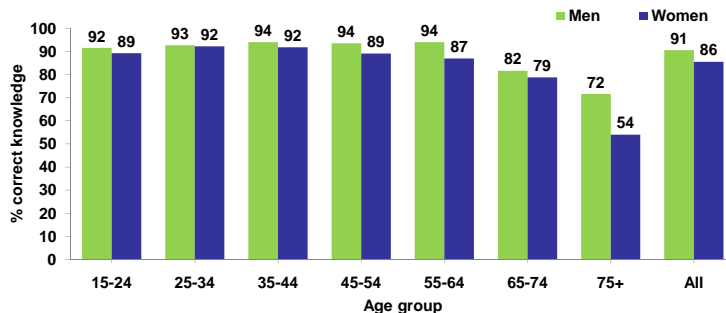


Fig. 7: Having one faithful uninfected partner protects against HIV, by education level and gender, Belgium, 2008

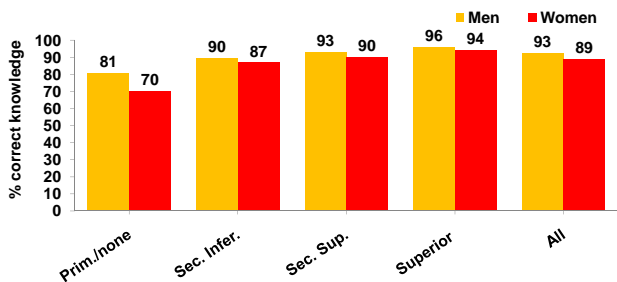
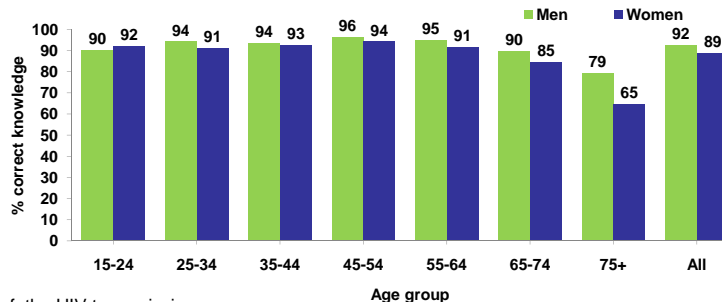


Fig. 8: Having one faithful partner protects against HIV, by age group and gender, Belgium, 2008



For the 4 indicators, the people older than 65 years are less aware of the mode of the HIV transmission.

Conclusions: This analysis shows that there are two groups at risk in Belgium: people with a low educational level and people in the youngest age category (15-24 years), who are at the beginning of their sexual life. Awareness campaigns geared towards this important groups should be reinforced.

In general, the knowledge on the importance of condom use and having one faithful uninfected partner is good, but the knowledge on the effect of abstinence is lacking. The idea that choosing healthy looking partners protects against HIV transmission exists, especially among the people with the lowest educational level. Awareness should also be oriented in that direction, besides continuing the ongoing campaigns.