

By MONALISA DAS

# ARE THEY REALLY SMART AFTER ALL?

Even though teenagers and young adults are subjected to a barrage of information on sex and sexuality, this doesn't mean that they are any smarter about these issues



**S**AFE sex is all about satisfying your partner, quips 19-year-old Nishant Arora, a student of Delhi University. He can't be singled out for his ignorance though. Meet the young adults of Delhi who swear by the "F" word and yet don't know much about it. They may flaunt a BTDT (been there done that) status and be "cool" about open relationships and condom vending machines on campus. But does this hip approach mean they know all that they need to know about sexual health or is this just a façade? Dig a bit deeper and you will find out. "I have friends with an active sexual life who don't use regular protection. I also know some girls who take contraceptive pills once in every 2-3 weeks," says 20-year-old Rohan, a student of Hansraj College.

Information comes at the click of a button for these young adults. But their level of knowledge on sexual matters lags behind. "Today's youth may have access to information, but just knowing what sex is all about is not enough. They still know very little on "how" to go about it," says Dr Prakash Kothari, founder advisor to World Association for Sexual Health. However, it's not true that everybody is dealing with sex irresponsibly. "Contraception should be used only under medical supervision," cautions 19-year-old Devang. "I have been in a relationship for the last two years. We have tried a couple of methods, but my girlfriend feels a condom is the best," says another 21-year-old business management student.

Some feel that you shouldn't bother about contraception at all if you have sex only occasionally. "I think protection is needed by only those who have regular sex," says Sunaina Khara, 17, who has recently cleared her boards and is not into any relationship yet.

Western TV shows promote the idea that sexuality is healthy for young people, while societal and cultural messages on home ground on this matter are conflicting. The impact of this mixed messaging is confusion. "It's an age driven by adventure coupled with a lack of understanding despite the information overload from unreliable sources. An easy access to resources allows kids to experiment with sex and engage in risky behaviour, such as unprotected sex," says Dr Ash Pachauri, director and CEO, Centre for Human Progress.

One thing that's certain is that today's young adults are more vocal about sex. "Among college students, premarital sex is no more a taboo. Being experimental with sex is also quite an integral part of campus life," says Dr Kothari. "However, these do not ensure that young adults are getting smarter about it. They are still surrounded by silly notions and indulging in unhealthy sexual activities, mainly because of lack of proper sex education. Sex education doesn't mean just to tell people what they don't know. It is to make them behave in a manner that they don't know," he remarks.

## SAFE SEX = NO BABIES

TAKE a round in any of the hip campuses of Delhi and you will find that one common idea stuck in the head of the teens and young adults is that practicing safe sex essentially means avoiding pregnancy. "Using protection is extremely important. This is mainly because we shouldn't be getting into situations where we have to regret in future, such as an unwanted pregnancy," quips 20-year-old Vishal Taneja, a commerce student from Delhi University. According to him, condom is the first choice for youngsters. "It's the easiest and the safest means of protection. Also it's readily available," he says. Many agree with him and prefer condom over contraceptive pills as the latter may come

with some "side effects".

Even in the Western world biggest concern. In a recent report by the National Centre for Health Statistics in the US, 98 percent of teens said they have used birth control at least once, with condoms being the most popular choice. Whereas in India, around 30 percent young men and 10 percent young women have experienced unprotected premarital sex, says a report by Population Council.

Pregnancy is the chief preoccupation of young adults when it comes to sex. For them, protec-

tion against sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) or infections comes only as a second priority, that too not always. This explains why dental dams are less popular among them as these essentially protect against STDs during oral sex, rather than against pregnancy. "Risk perception about pregnancy is very different from risk perception about STDs among young adults," points out Dr Pachauri. While condoms do protect against pregnancy, they also act as a mechanical barrier against sexually transmitted infections. "But youngsters prefer condoms over contraceptive

pills only because their "notion" about side effects associated with pills that make condoms a preferred choice. This clearly reflects the misconceptions they have on sexual matters," he says.

## STD MEANS HIV

WHEN talking about STDs, HIV or AIDS is what comes to everyone's minds. Some may recall a few names like gonorrhoea but are clueless about what this disease is all about. This is worrying, since World Health Organisation findings are that curable STDs like syphilis, gonorrhoea and chlamydia are more common among young adults worldwide than HIV.

As for HIV, many don't even know that it is different from

Most youngsters think that HIV spreads by tattooing, masturbation or mosquito bites



QAMAR SIBTAIN

FOR 20-YEAR-OLD Nikhil Gupta, sex is not something to feel either shy or desperate about. "It becomes sensational because we make it so," says Gupta, a political science student of Delhi University who has been a peer educator on sexual health issues including HIV for the past two years. He conducts workshops among teenagers in schools & colleges on these matters. "I have realised that youngsters are still trapped by social taboos and misconceptions," says Nikhil. Most are hesitant during a session but queries come flooding in

## "MY PEERS CALL ME A SEX GURU"

through emails and sms after the session ends. Nikhil says that most are resistant to the idea of condoms and believe them to be unhygienic, hampering pleasure. "Others come up with personal questions also like what size of condoms they should be using and measures they should be taking for safe sex," he says. His expertise on the topic has made him popular as the 'sex guru' and 'NGO baba' among friends.

He admits that a lot of his peers are practicing sex, and yes, many of them aren't concerned about safety. For some having an active sexual life is cool. "But some also cook up stories," he says. Being a youngster himself, he feels it's healthy to have sexual urges. But they may turn into desperation because of the societal norms which don't allow an open discussion on sex. "No wonder we see youngsters in compromising