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Stigma Snapshot

Sexually transmissible infections 2023

Stigma has a major impact on health outcomes for people living with bloodborne viruses (BBVs) and sexually transmissible infections (STIs). The Australian Government Department of Health strategies for BBVs and STIs explicitly aim to 'eliminate the negative impact of stigma, discrimination, and legal and human rights issues on people's health'.

As STIs remain prevalent among young people in Australia, there is a need to monitor stigma towards STIs in this population. Since 2018, indicators measuring expressed, expected, and experienced stigma towards people with STIs have been included in the *Debrief* survey – an online survey of young people (aged 18-29 years) in Australia about STI-related knowledge, attitudes, and practices. This snapshot report highlights main findings from *Debrief* 2023 and includes comparisons with previous *Debrief* surveys conducted in 2018 and 2021.

2,338 people completed the 2023 *Debrief* survey

48% male – 77% heterosexual – 3% Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
26% university students – 38% employed full-time
77% ever had sex

Of all participants, 30% ever tested for STIs – 8% ever diagnosed with an STI
3% reported an STI diagnosis in the past 12 months.

Among all participants in 2023 (n=2,338), 48% reported that they would behave negatively towards others because of an STI, including 10% who would 'often' or 'always' do so. The proportion of participants who indicated that they would behave negatively towards others because of STIs was higher than in either of the previous *Debrief* surveys (37% in 2018 and 21% in 2021), however, this may have been influenced by demographic differences in the samples of each survey round.

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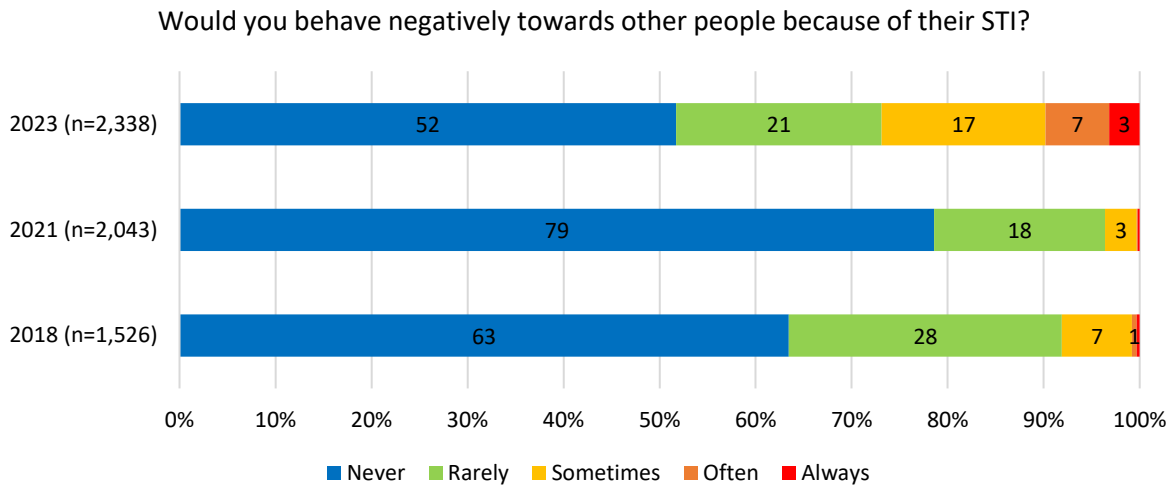
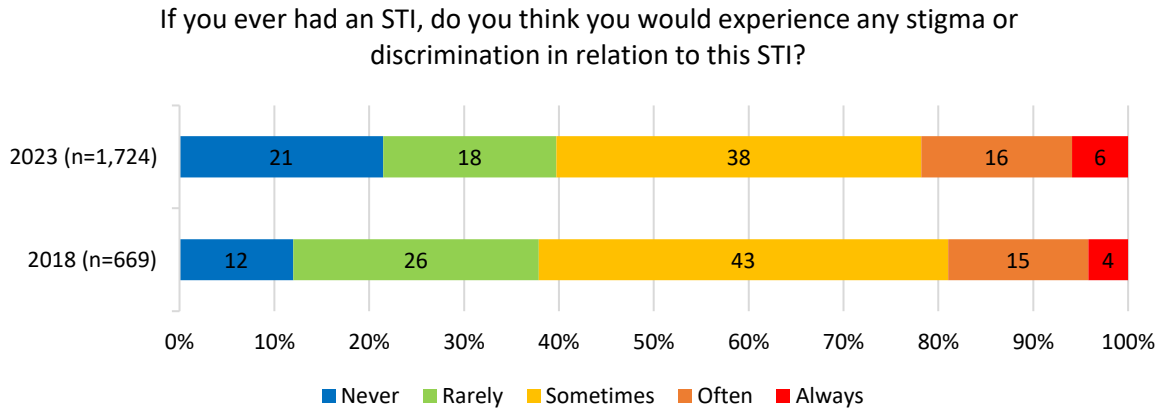
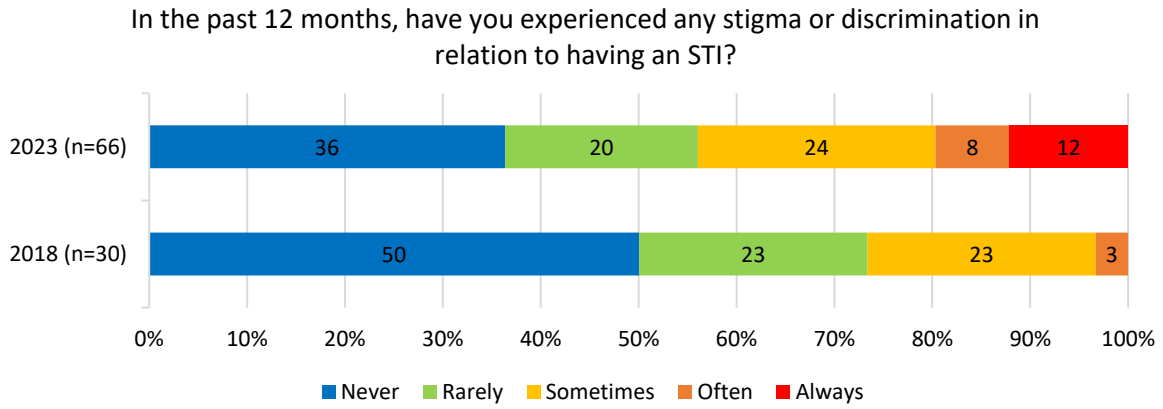


The proportion of participants who expected they would experience stigma or discrimination if they ever had an STI was higher than the proportion who reported they would behave negatively towards other people because of an STI. Among sexually active participants in 2023 who had not been diagnosed with an STI in the past 12 months (n=1,724), 79% expected that they would experience stigma or discrimination if they were ever diagnosed with an STI, including 22% who believed this would 'often' or 'always' be the case. The proportion of participants who expected they would 'often' or 'always' experience stigma in relation to an STI did not significantly change between 2018 and 2023, however, the proportion who expected any stigma decreased from 88% to 79%. It is also worth noting that of 128 participants who had ever been diagnosed with an STI (but not in the past 12 months), 86% expected that they would experience stigma if diagnosed with an STI, compared with 78% of those who had never been diagnosed with an STI.



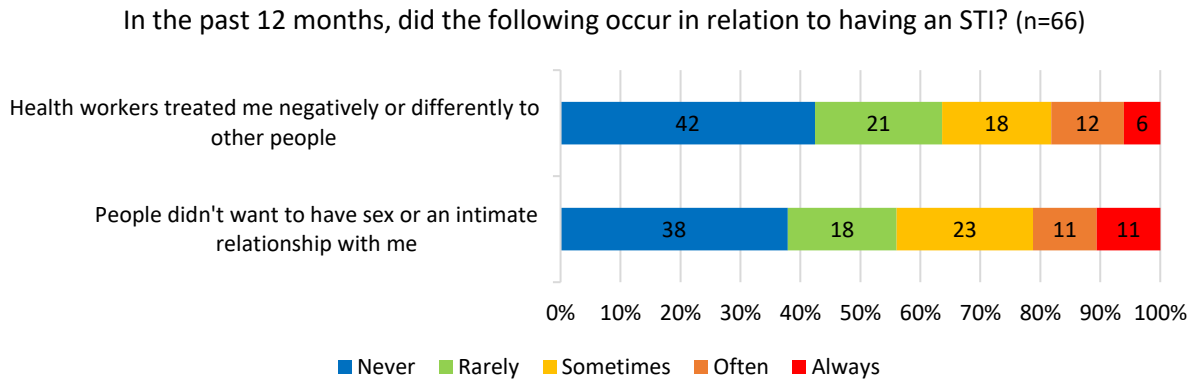
Note: This indicator was not included in the 2021 survey.

Of the participants in the 2023 survey who reported an STI diagnosis in the past 12 months (n=66), 64% reported experiencing any stigma or discrimination in relation to their STI, including 20% who stated this 'often' or 'always' occurred. This was a larger proportion than reported experiencing stigma related to an STI in 2018 (50%). However, due to the small number of participants recently diagnosed with an STI in each survey, these differences should be interpreted cautiously.



Note: This indicator was not included in the 2021 survey.

In 2023, 58% of participants who had been diagnosed with an STI in the past 12 months reported experiencing any negative treatment by health workers because of their STI, including 18% who indicated that this was 'often' or 'always' the case. A slightly larger proportion (62%) reported that other people did not want to have sex or an intimate relationship with them because of their STI, including 22% who stated this 'often' or 'always' occurred.



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Experiences of stigma and discrimination were common among the small proportion of participants in the *Debrief* survey who reported they had been diagnosed with an STI in the past 12 months. Stigma persists in healthcare settings, with over half of participants diagnosed with an STI reporting negative or different treatment from health workers. STIs diagnoses also negatively affected intimate and sexual relationships among 62% of those who reported an STI in the past year. Notably, almost half of all participants indicated that they would behave negatively towards others because of an STI – a larger proportion than previously reported in *Debrief* surveys – and almost 80% of those without an STI diagnosis expected they would experience stigma if they did ever have an STI. These expectations of stigma could prove to be significant barriers to appropriate healthcare, including STI testing, diagnosis, and treatment. It is therefore important to address any perceived stigmatising attitudes and practices in healthcare and broader community settings to increase accessibility to necessary healthcare.

The Stigma Indicators Monitoring Project will continue to monitor experiences of stigma and discrimination reported by people diagnosed with STIs, as well as negative behaviour expressed by health care professionals and the general public. Ongoing monitoring of these experiences and expectations may help to inform wide-ranging intervention initiatives to address stigma towards STIs within health care systems and throughout society.

If the results presented here have upset you in any way, we encourage you to seek support from Lifeline (13 11 44).

This project was supported by a grant from the Australian Government Department of Health.

We would like to thank everyone who completed the survey.

For more information on this project, please see http://bit.ly/stigma_indicators

Suggested citation: Broady, T., Adam, P., Cama, E., Brener, L., & Treloar, C. (2024). *Stigma snapshot: Sexually transmissible infections 2023.* Sydney: Centre for Social Research in Health, UNSW Sydney. http://doi.org/10.26190/q8jc-7s22

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