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More than half of Australian young people are using strangulation during sex: new research

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We recently surveyed thousands of young Australians about their experiences of strangulation (or choking) during sex and found more than half (57%) reported being strangled by a partner during sex. About half (51%) said they had strangled their partner during sex.

For some people, strangulation is a high-risk but acceptable part of consensual sex, and it is important not to stigmatise people who use it.

But strangulation carries significant risks and harms to those who experience it, including the possibility of serious injury or even death, sometimes months after the event.

Participants most commonly reported first becoming aware of strangulation during sex when they were around 16–18 years old (29%), or during early adulthood, 19–21 years (24%).

People also reported they were exposed to information about or depictions of strangulation during sex through various sources, most commonly via pornography (61%), but also through movies (40%), friends (32%), social media (31%) and discussions with current or potential partners (29%).

Rates highest among gender-diverse people

We surveyed 4,702 Australians aged between 18 and 35 who had previously had a sexual experience. We defined strangulation or choking as when a person's breathing is stopped or restricted by the use of hands, other body parts or ties (like ropes) around the neck. People sometimes refer to this behaviour as breath play or erotic asphyxiation.

More women (61%) than men (43%) reported ever having been strangled, with a high proportion of people who identified as trans or gender-diverse (78%) reporting being strangled.

More men (59%) than women (40%) responded they had strangled their partners, and nearly three-quarters (74%) of trans and gender-diverse participants reported that they had strangled their partners.



People in lesbian relationships were more likely to have strangled their partner during sex than heterosexual women. Shutterstock

While a high proportion of all genders reported being strangled or strangling partners during sex, women and trans and gender-diverse participants reported it happening more often compared to men.

Men, on the other hand, reported strangling partners during sex more often compared to women, with no difference compared to trans and gender diverse people.

Our data also showed gay and bisexual men were more likely to have been strangled than straight men, and that bisexual women were more likely than straight women to have ever been strangled or to have strangled a partner. Furthermore, lesbian women were more likely than straight women to have ever strangled a partner.

How old and how often?

For close to a third of participants, the first time they were strangled (30%) and/or strangled a partner (31%) occurred between the ages of 19 and 21.

On average, participants who reported being strangled during sex said they had been strangled around six times, by around three partners. Those who had strangled partners reported doing it around five times, with about three different partners.

Read more: A new bill would bring Victoria's strangulation laws in line with other states – but consent complicates matters

What did consent look like?

People generally responded they neither agreed nor disagreed to be strangled during sex. However, strangulation was generally perceived to be consensual, with consent understood in different ways.

Participants who had strangled partners reported more often that their partners played an active role in consent (79%) including asking to be strangled, agreeing to be strangled, or withdrawing previous consent, than those who were strangled (57%).

Consent was not always negotiated at the time. People who had been choked or choked a partner both responded that consent was negotiated during a previous sexual encounter where the person being choked gave their future consent.



Consent for strangulation wasn't always sought in the moment, but many respondents considered their experiences to be consensual. Shutterstock

Among participants who were strangled, women (27%) were more likely than men (23%) to report that they asked to be strangled. Similarly, women (21%) were more likely than men (15%) to report that they had given consent during a previous sexual experience.

Among trans and gender-diverse participants, more than a quarter (29%) reported they had asked to be strangled and around one-fifth (20%) said they had given consent during a previous experience.

Nearly a third of men (32%) and a fifth of women (20%) reported they agreed to be strangled when they were asked by their partner. Around one-fifth (23%) of trans and gender-diverse participants reported that they agreed to be strangled when they were asked by their partner.

Trans and gender-diverse participants (12%) were more likely to report withdrawing consent compared to men (7%) and women (6%).

Lastly, women (10%) were more likely than men (8%) and trans and gender-diverse participants (4%), to report that they “did not consent, but did not ask or motion for them to stop”.

Why is this concerning?

Strangulation is linked to many different kinds of injuries regardless of whether there is consent. These can include bruising, sore throat, neck pain, a hoarse voice, a cough, difficulty swallowing, swollen lips, nausea and vomiting.

Other more serious impacts include pregnancy miscarriage, unconsciousness, brain injury and death. Miscarriage and death can occur weeks or months after the initial strangulation.



A woman tenderly touches her throat with both hands

Strangulation can have a negative impact on someone's health. Shutterstock

Generally, there are no visible injuries associated with strangulation, but even when the person remains conscious, brain injury may occur. We know the more often people are strangled, the more likely they are to experience brain injury. This includes memory loss and difficulties problem-solving. Brain injury also accumulates so the more strangulations, the worse it becomes.

Strangulation has been criminalised across Australia because of the risk associated with it in the context of domestic violence and the harms linked with it more generally. But there are different rules across Australia about consent. And consent can be “blurry”.

In most states, strangulation is probably legal where there are no injuries reported and where there is consent. However, given how common strangulation during sex is, criminal law isn't the best answer.

Instead, much better education is needed about the harms of this behaviour, and support is needed for those navigating this practice.