

Response to 60-day FRN Comment

We have received a recommendation from George Washington University Epidemiology professor Many Magnus, and graduate students Katherine Hill and Sydney Bornstein which provides a persuasive rationale for extending the target ages for NHANES's sexual behavior questions to include persons 60 years and over. We appreciate the suggestion and agree that the inclusion of a wider age group for the sexual health questions would greatly enhance our understanding of older people's overall health. The sexual behavior questions have been used extensively by researchers; published papers examine associations beyond those expected and range from dietary quality to periodontal disease to psoriasis; we understand their value even for a limited age group.

As you know, the hallmark of NHANES is its examination content and most question decisions, including target age groups, are determined to closely align with exam data. Sexual activity questions, first introduced in NHANES III (1988-1994), were included to provide essential risk factors for the analysis of HIV and herpes data which were also new to the survey. In NHANES 1999 and years following, the panel of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and related conditions increased, as did the number of questions about sexual behavior. Aside from analyses of blood and urine specimens, NHANES uniquely obtained self-collected vaginal, penile, and oral swabs from participants to obtain population estimates of HPV infection, the most common sexually transmitted infection in the U.S. Over the course of NHANES, the target ages for the sexual behavior questions have closely tracked those of the STI panel with a few questions extending to age 69. Proposals to modify or elicit new exam and questionnaire content are evaluated on their scientific merit, feasibility, time allocation, and participant acceptability, among other factors. Decision making is also predicated on the availability of funding from collaborators -- primarily other CDC offices and federal agencies. And finally, we seek to balance priorities of equally important health behaviors and conditions.

This is an opportune time to have received this recommendation as NHANES is currently in the process of evaluating content for the next cycle (i.e., 2025). For content related to sexual behavior, NHANES will be working closely with CDC centers to review the details of their proposals; target age groups included. We appreciate your interest in the value of NHANES for public health research among persons of all ages and will certainly contact you should we have any additional questions.