

Welcome to the twenty-ninth edition of **DASH**

This edition features articles from the following individuals and organisations:

- QUBSU Officer for Welfare, Bethany Moore, discusses the drop-in sexual health clinic at Queen's Students' Union.
- Relate NI's Communications and Engagement Manager, Stevie Maginn, discusses new research highlighting the state of people's mental fitness and relationships.
- Relate NI's Communications Assistant, Cara McVeigh, highlights a new report which unpicks the complexities of modern dating and relationships.
- IFPA's Communications Officer, Sophie Mac Neice, outlines the findings of the State of World Population report 2022 which reveals nearly half of all pregnancies are unintended.

- Informing Choices NI's Director of Advocacy and Policy, Ruairi Rowan, reports on engagement with politicians at the Big Sexy Hustings event.

In our Horizons feature the chairperson of Wolfe Tones, Greencastle GAA, Stephen McCourt, discusses recent workshops focusing on masculinity, values and combatting violence against women.

ICNI is contracted by the Public Health Agency to write and produce DASH.

Showcase your project, publicise an event or comment on this edition by contacting the editor, Ruairi Rowan, by email ruairi.rowan@informingchoicesni.org or telephone **028 9031 6100**

Drop-in Sexual Health Clinic Opens in Queen's Students' Union

by Bethany Moore, Student Officer for Welfare, QUBSU



In March, Queen's Students' Union reinstated their Sexual Health Drop-in Clinic for students, with services provided by the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. The clinic operates on a Monday from 10am to 3pm, in the current Students' Union building on 3 Elmwood Avenue.

Staff from GUM and the Sexual and Reproductive Health team can offer students free STI testing (with no examination), condoms, the emergency contraceptive pill, contraceptive advice, and some methods like the contraceptive implant. The Students' Union also plans to have designated clinical spaces for these services to continue operating within their new building, One Elmwood, which is due to open in the coming months.

As QUBSU Student Officer for Welfare, I have prioritised the reinstatement of these services during my term. These services are vital for students. This year we have seen an increase in students who are seeking a range of sexual and reproductive healthcare services and they aren't sure where to go. For us to be able to provide this service for them, free of charge, without appointment and on campus, is a huge privilege.

For many students, university is where they become empowered to take control of their sexual health. Having the Sexual Health Drop-In Clinic on campus improves accessibility for all students, especially those who may be working outside of class-time and those who are parents or carers. It also removes the stigma about looking after your sexual health. These services have been so well-received by students and I am so thankful that the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust are providing this. I can't wait to see how these services continue once we move to the new building at One Elmwood.

New research highlights the state of people's mental fitness and relationships in NI

by Stevie Maginn, Communications and Engagement Manager, Relate NI

New research commissioned by the Relationship Support Charity, Relate NI, to coincide with the launch of their new 'Golden Threads' Project highlights the state of people's mental fitness and relationships in NI.

The research, which was conducted between 22-29 April 2022, shows that 68% have felt a sense of despair or hopelessness; 64% said that talking to people had felt too much for them; 80% felt they are sometimes unable to cope when things go wrong; and 13% said that they never have someone to turn to for support when needed.

While 64% of people felt that their relationship with their partner was fairly good or very good, people appear to be suffering in their relationship with self, which was the most common relationship people rated as poor. 19% of respondents said their relationship with themselves is bad. In fact, 37% of people surveyed felt undeserving of love and care.

In terms of family relationships, 25% felt that their relationship with their sibling(s) was either bad, or they were indifferent to it. People were more likely to have a poor relationship with a father, 10%, than with a mother, 7%, while 9% rated their relationship with their in laws as either fairly bad or very bad. Only 5% reported having a poor relationship with their children but 55% witnessed their parents fighting or have fought with their partner in front of their own children.

Research has shown that poor quality relationships can be a stress factor for mental illness, and 78% of people agreed that poor relationships can negatively affect mental health and wellbeing. 75% said it was important to resolve relationship problems to limit the negative impacts on mental health, however 23% said they do not know what a healthy relationship looks like. Only 47% said that they would seek relationship support if their relationships were under pressure.

Significantly, only 56% of people regularly make time to invest in relationships and 60% said that they would rather keep their relationship problems private from their friends and family.

Commenting on the findings, Trevor Wright, Business Operations Manager at Relate NI, said;

"It is good to see that the majority of people recognise the importance of healthy relationships to our mental health and wellbeing. However, it is worrying that despite knowing this, many people still feel a stigma around reaching out for support."

"Family and friends can be an important support structure, and confiding in them can help bring you closer together. However, if you are like the 60% of people in the survey who would rather keep your relationship issues private from your friends and family, then it is important that you seek help elsewhere!"

"52% of people in the survey said self-help resources with information and guidance from trained professionals would be helpful to them and their families in supporting their relationships and a further 48% said that access to educational programmes could help them to understand how to work on and improve their relationships."

"As part of our Golden Threads Project launch during Mental Health Awareness Week, Relate NI are delighted to be able to offer a range of new self-help resources which can be downloaded free from our website. We are also able to offer relationship education programmes in community settings in the Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon Borough Council area and would welcome organisations getting in touch to work with us on these."

"43% of respondents in our survey said they didn't know the tipping point of when to seek support and we would say to them that there is no need to wait until things have gotten really bad. Regular relationship maintenance when things are good can help your relationships from falling into crisis in the first place."

You can view the Golden Threads self-help resources, and find out more about the education and counselling programs on the Relate NI website <https://www.relateni.org/golden-threads/> or by calling **028 9032 3454**.



Relate NI, Golden Threads Project Team

Men's Heads & Hearts report unpicks complexities of modern dating and relationships

by Cara McVeigh, Communications Assistant, Relate NI

Relate & eHarmony recently carried out a landmark survey of 2531 men across the UK, looking at how men are feeling about dating and relationships post-lockdown, and the impact this was having on their mental health and wellbeing as they move forward. The results were combined with insights from Relate counsellors and published in the 'Men's Heads & Hearts Report.'

Why focus predominantly on men and those identifying as male?

Simply, men are less likely to seek help than women, both with health and well-being problems, and with relationships (Mental Health Foundation, 2022). In order to help us develop new approaches to supporting men to develop healthy relationships, we wanted to know how men are feeling about relationships, their mental health and openness to seek relationship support.

Significantly, our survey found that 22% of LGBTQ+ men felt that their mental health was poor. Highlighting how other men are actually feeling can hopefully encourage more individuals to seek help and support.

What are men looking for in a partner?

The top three most important qualities in a romantic partner stated were:

- 1. Honesty (47%)
- 2. Trustworthy (47%)
- 3. Humour (42%)

How has the Pandemic impacted men's approach to dating and relationships?

Confusion around the dating etiquette

The pandemic has meant we have had to change social norms, such as greeting someone with an 'elbow touch' rather than a hug. It's then no surprise that 11% of men are confused by modern dating, and 13% of men think that it's harder to date now than it was 10 years ago.

'Men in Relationships'

Multiple lockdowns have also seen an increase in job loss/working from home. In some cases, this has resulted in a change in roles and responsibilities, and many are finding it difficult to adjust.

Impact of social media on dating & forming relationships

Online dating has become a popular way to form relationships. Interestingly, men make up 52.4% of online dating users (eHarmony). As a result of the pandemic and an increase in



online dating, men can feel extra pressure when in a face-to-face scenario. Meeting new people and forming relationships can be difficult, especially when only speaking to people 'virtually' as a result of the pandemic. Social media can also have a negative impact on self-appearance and self-esteem, having an impact on relationships with others, and most importantly with yourself.

Another report by MIND in 2019, 'Get it off your Chest,' found that 39% of males worried about their appearance were aged 18-24. Images on social media are usually filtered or airbrushed. It can be unhealthy to compare yourself to models and millionaires that have a team of people to make them look 'Insta-worthy'.

However, social media has also become a platform to promote mental well-being. Influencers have started sharing their own experience with mental health and their honesty has encouraged the 'It's okay not to be okay' campaign, helping others to open up and seek help.

Barriers to Accessing Help

Our poll found that only 20% of males feel comfortable showing vulnerability in romantic relationships. Vulnerability is an opportunity to grow as a person and find deeper meaning and satisfaction in relationships. Vulnerability enables a closer bond, invites honesty and creates a space for open communication, creating the solid foundations for a healthy relationship. It's therefore important that men feel they are able to seek support and be vulnerable in relationships.

Accessing Support

For more information on the Men's Heads & Hearts report, please visit our website <https://www.relateni.org/> where you can also find information regarding our counselling service which can help you with developing the skills required to form and maintain healthy relationships.

Relate's tips for men in relationships

- Communication is key.** Think (and talk) about what you want from your relationship. You can do this with help from Relate if it's hard to do by yourself.
- Consider your views around roles in your relationship.** Are your views in line with your partner's? If not, how can you better align these to make sure you're both on the same page?
- Help to break down some of the stigma around mental health and ask your male friends how they are.** And commit to listening to them if they want to talk.
- Commit to seeking help** if you need it whether that's with a partner or on your own.
- Be honest with yourself** about what you want and be prepared to give time and energy to your relationship if things need working on.
- Think about trying a new hobby or interest together.** It's fun to learn something new and will give you something to talk about.
- Make time for each other.** Lockdown has been hard for many couples. Spending quality time together as a couple can be a great way of reminding yourself why you chose to be together in the first place.

New report highlights that nearly half of all pregnancies are unintended

Sophie Mac Neice, Communications Officer, IFPA



“Half. That’s the share of pregnancies that women and girls do not deliberately choose. Nothing is more fundamental to bodily autonomy than the ability to decide whether or not to become pregnant. And yet for far too many people, this life-altering reproductive choice is no choice at all.”

The ground-breaking State of World Population report 2022, *“Seeing the Unseen: The case for action in the neglected crisis of unintended pregnancy”* by UNFPA, the United Nations sexual and reproductive health agency, reveals that 121 million pregnancies each year are unintended. UNFPA say this figure *“represents a global failure to uphold a basic human right”* and raises questions about *“how much the rights and potential of more than half of humanity are prioritized and valued.”*

The report warns that this human rights crisis has profound consequences for societies, women and girls and global health. For those in countries where abortion is illegal and unsafe, unintended pregnancy can lead to severe health consequences and even death. Over 60 per cent of unintended pregnancies end in abortion and an estimated 45 per cent of all abortions worldwide are unsafe. Unsafe abortion is one of the leading causes of maternal death globally.

Addressing the global unmet need for contraception and the reasons behind it are key. The report states an estimated 257 million women across the world who want to avoid pregnancy, are not using safe, modern methods of contraception and 172 million women are using no contraception at all. While contraception is key, it is not enough. A range of other key factors also contribute to unintended pregnancy including poverty, stalled economic development, harmful norms and stigma surrounding women controlling their own fertility, and gender inequality. Where data is available, it shows that nearly a quarter of all women are not able to say no to sex. During conflict and crisis such as the ongoing war in Ukraine, vulnerability to unintended pregnancy increases as women often

lose access to contraceptives and sexual violence increases. Some studies estimate that over 20 per cent of refugee women and girls will experience sexual violence.

The report calls for action by decision-makers and health systems to prioritise the prevention of unintended pregnancies by improving the accessibility, acceptability, quality and variety of contraception and expanding quality sexual and reproductive health care and information. It urges policy makers, community leaders and all individuals to empower women and girls to make affirmative decisions about sex, contraception and motherhood, and to foster societies that recognize the full worth of women and girls. If they do, women and girls will be able to contribute fully to society, and will have the tools, information and power to make this fundamental choice— to have children, or not—for themselves.

UNFPA’s Irish collaborating partner, The Irish Family Planning Association (IFPA) hosted the Irish launch of the report in Dublin. The event was chaired by Holly Cairns, TD and Co-Chair of the All Party Oireachtas Interest Group on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights. Jacqueline Mahon, Principal Advisor for International Development Finance at UNFPA presented the report and said;

“This is a report... about what happens before a pregnancy: the information not received, the contraceptives not used, the conversation not had between partners. It is about hostility to, and misinformation about, contraception use that undermines women’s ownership of their own bodies”.

Ruairí de Búrca, Director General of Irish Aid, officially launched the report representing Minister of State for Overseas Development Aid and Diaspora, Colm Brophy TD. He announced a €500,000 increase in Ireland’s annual funding to UNFPA, with an additional €1.5 million allocated to provide life-saving sexual and reproductive health services for women and girls fleeing the war in Ukraine.

IFPA’s Medical Director, Dr Caitríona Henchion spoke at the launch. She said;

“As a society, we must prioritise the crisis of unintended pregnancy. Policy makers, parliamentarians, healthcare providers and civil society must continue to work together to remove remaining barriers and ensure all individuals can fully exercise their reproductive rights”.

Read the full State of World Population report at <https://www.unfpa.org/swp2022>

Find out more about UNFPA at <https://www.unfpa.org>

Find out more about IFPA at <https://www.ifpa.ie>



HORIZONS FEATURE

The chairperson of Wolfe Tones, Greencastle GAA, Stephen McCourt, discusses recent workshops focusing on masculinity, values and combatting violence against women.

What motivated Wolfe Tones to participate in a programme focusing on masculinity, values and violence against women?

The tragic murder of Ashling Murphy sent shockwaves across the island. It subsequently touched hundreds of thousands of Gaels across Ireland, as Ashling was a member of the Gaelic Games family. Wolfe Tones was not immune to that and shared the grief and horror that was spread across all 32 counties. I am fully aware of my own male privilege, but also committed to my responsibility to use the club as a vehicle to change lives. I put forward some ideas of things the club could do in our own small space, most of them probably quite poor and off the mark. At the same time Senior Ladies footballer Sophie Magee opened the conversation about participating in a series of workshops focusing on masculinity, values and violence against women and having those important conversations within the club. This was not an easy thing to do considering the context, but one which was appreciated and grasped. Furthermore, the feedback I got was the murder had a direct impact on the women of Wolfe Tones, not only emotionally in terms of grief and heartbreak but also in terms of their own individual safety. Risk assessments took place within the club, which then lead to action being taken to ensure the safety of our female members. The culmination of this drove the idea to approach Informing Choices NI to deliver a series of workshops as well as having additional conversations about how male members could stand in solidarity with victims of violence perpetrated by men.

Was there any resistance within the club to you seeking this programme?

None. When you consider GAA clubs are reflective of wider society with a variety of personalities, opinions and beliefs, I think that showed a glimpse of our internal culture and the people we have involved at various levels of the club. It also shows the recognition that there is a problem, and we can help be part of the solution.

The programme was delivered exclusively to male participants.

Would it help the discussion if women were also included, and if so when do you think this should occur?

We specifically handpicked people to participate on the basis that they coached girls or women and they were in a position to influence others. It was also delivered to those who coach younger men and boys within the club so they can directly influence and embed good values and behaviours. I think having women in the room who live these issues everyday will be important in the time ahead. They can situate some of the discussions in live situations and challenge where it is needed. The extension of the programme should occur post-haste. Not for want of trying, but we can't change the world overnight, however every time we take action to normalise these conversations, we come a bit closer.

What feedback have you received regarding the programme?

The feedback has been wholly positive. A number of those who attended commented about the importance of

the workshops and how it changed their outlook on their role within the club. One person commented that the discussions encouraged them to think about masculinity differently and remove it from the box that it has been put in.

How will you use this learning going forward in relation to creating a more inclusive environment within the club?

The workshops had two important functions. The first was at an individual level that helped educate, inform and challenge the members present. The second, which has come afterwards, was providing a platform for exploring how we internalise the learning in a more strategic way. Going forward, we will be looking at how we embed this in a structural and organisational sense. We are in the process of putting together a project, facilitated by Sophie, that will engage with other external bodies to influence how we organise and structure the club going into the future. We are committed to ensuring Wolfe Tones is not only a safe space for women, but actively empowers and puts women in the lead. We never want the club to be a men's club that permits women to take part, but instead a club with equality as the base from where it starts. That requires work that extends beyond the individual level, but our club is confident and capable enough to move that forward. That will ultimately have a large impact in our own community as we play our part in the struggle to confine these issues to the dustbin of history.

Engaging with politicians – The Big Sexy Hustings

by Ruairi Rowan, Director of Advocacy and Policy, ICNI

In the lead up to the Northern Ireland Assembly election ICNI and Positive Life hosted the 'Big Sexy Hustings'. This provided an opportunity for individuals from the community, voluntary and statutory sectors, working in the field of sexual and reproductive health, to interact with a cross-party section of politicians regarding relationships and sexuality education (RSE) as well as sexual and reproductive health services. The panel comprised of politicians from seven political parties as outlined below:

- **Paula Bradley**, DUP deputy leader
- **Fiona Ferguson**, PBP candidate in North Belfast
- **Lauren Kerr**, UUP candidate in East Belfast
- **Cara Hunter**, SDLP candidate in East Londonderry
- **Emma Sheerin**, Sinn Féin candidate in Mid Ulster
- **Rachel Woods**, Green Party candidate in North Down
- **Kate Nicholl**, Alliance Party candidate in South Belfast

During the event each of the panel members reflected on their memories of RSE growing up and what their parties would do to prioritise sexual and reproductive health services and RSE going forward. A summary of their contributions is outlined below:

Paula Bradley began by reflecting on her experience of being a teenager in the 1980s. She described this as a horrendous time when it came to sex education – because there was none. Paula referenced a Biology lesson where she was shown the workings of the female body, and this was the extent of the education she received. She stated that her mother was a social worker who liked to talk about things, but sex wasn't one of them. Therefore, she relied heavily on her peers sharing information. Paula discussed the 'Don't Die of Ignorance' television adverts regarding HIV, and how these began her sexual journey in relation to protection. She discussed travelling four bus journeys away from her home to access contraception as she didn't want anyone who knew her, or her parents, to know that she was getting birth control. She concluded by stating that she hoped young women today have different experiences to her. She outlined the need to provide them with fact-based education



and that they know it is okay to say no. She also highlighted the need for young men to be educated around consent and respecting women and their choices.

Fiona Ferguson stated that she didn't think that we have moved on much in relation to RSE since the 1980s. She referenced being shown horrific videos in relation to both abortion and childbirth in school and that her overriding memory was being taught abstinence, which doesn't work. Fiona outlined that RSE must be consistent across schools and that it has to be inclusive, all-encompassing and consent focused. She referenced the Gillen Review regarding serious sexual offences in Northern Ireland, as well as the inquiry report from the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, and stated that we need to focus on tackling violence against women and girls as well as commission abortion services.

Lauren Kerr began by stating that when she was 10 a group of girls in her school were taken out of PE and told that they would start having a period soon and that this would continue for a long time. The class were then sent home with that knowledge. She later recalled in Biology that her class were taught the mechanics of sex, and then again sent home. She referenced





watching two videos, one of which was Vera Drake which relates to backstreet abortions, which she said probably radicalised her regarding reproductive rights, and the other was a childbirth video, during which she had to leave the classroom. She outlined that she is really passionate about RSE and referenced her sexuality as a gay woman. She recalled that when she was growing up her sexual identity didn't exist in any representation that she saw regarding sexual relations or healthy relationships and that this is why all-inclusive RSE is so important. The UUP has a commitment to RSE in their manifesto, alongside zero new HIV diagnosis by 2030.

Cara Hunter opened by stating that when she reflects on her experiences of RSE the word that comes to mind is failure. She referenced her education and like other panel members referred to receiving a one-hour Biology discussion regarding how the body works, but that she wasn't provided with any additional information. Cara mentioned that she finished her secondary education in the United States and could see the stark differences about how sex is viewed there compared to Northern Ireland. She outlined that a complete change in RSE is needed and that we have a professional and moral obligation to ensure that young people are empowered to make informed choices. She stressed that it is not just sex education, but about relationships and understanding what a healthy relationship looks like. She concluded by stating that the shame and stigma surrounding sexual health needs to be removed and a fully resourced Sexual Health Strategy implemented.

Emma Sheerin said that one of her key memories of RSE was a Mathematics teacher who continually referred to testicles as 'testies' throughout the lesson. She mentioned that a nurse came to her secondary school and did a condom demonstration and discussed menstruation. She stated that her mum was horrified that the boys were present for the discussion about menstruation, but that the discussion itself was brief. It did not include information around things like irregular periods and there was no reference to consent, what a healthy relationship looks like, or LGBT issues. She said the overriding message regarding sex was to hold off until you were married and then have as many babies as you wish. Emma referenced the important role that RSE plays in preventing unplanned pregnancies and that it is Sinn Féin policy to have standardised RSE across all schools. She referenced barriers to RSE in relation to the ethos of a school, and the possible need for external facilitators to deliver lessons. She finished by referencing Ireland's long and shameful history of misogyny and the need to see our young people served better than previous generations.

Rachel Woods mentioned that her parents bought her a book about how babies are made which was based around a mum and dad, who were married and in love. She mentioned that in secondary school the girls were told that every month they would find themselves bleeding, but not to let anyone know, and to make sure they covered it up. Like other panel members she also mentioned watching a video in Biology class and afterwards labeling a diagram of body parts. Similar to Paula Bradley she mentioned that she was terrified that her parents would find out that she was on the pill, which she accessed from a family GP. Rachel contrasted her experience of RSE to that of her brother who went to a different school and was taught how to put a condom on and where to access contraception. Abortion services were also discussed. She mentioned the importance of engaging with young people regarding the content included in RSE and that provision cannot be left to the ethos of schools. Finally, she referenced the importance of having a Sexual Health Strategy and the need to be assertive in reaching out to vulnerable groups including sex workers, transgender people, drug users and prisoners.

Kate Nicholl said she was also given a book about sex. She discussed growing up in Zimbabwe in the 1990s and that 25% of the population aged between 15-49 had HIV. She said as so many people were affected by the illness children were taught from a very young age about sex and how to mitigate from STIs. Kate spoke about visiting a family friend in hospital who died of AIDS shortly afterwards. When she moved to Northern Ireland people in her school would joke about AIDS, which she found very upsetting. She described herself as a fierce advocate for RSE and outlined that Alliance Party policy is for standardisation across all schools. She too discussed the need for a properly resourced Sexual Health Strategy and joined up working between the Education, Health and Justice Departments. This she said should be a priority in the next Assembly mandate.

ICNI and Positive Life intend to build on this event and will continue to provide opportunities for politicians to discuss sexual and reproductive health services and RSE in order to build their knowledge and confidence when discussing these issues.



SEXUAL HEALTH HELPLINE

ICNI provide a confidential sexual health helpline which offers information and support across a range of sexual health issues including contraception and sexually transmitted infections. The helpline can give details of the opening hours and locations of contraceptive and sexual health (CASH) clinics and genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinics. These services and their opening times have been impacted as a result of Covid-19. For the most up to date information please call the sexual health helpline on **028 9031 6100**. Our helpline is staffed Monday to Friday, from 9am to 5pm. The helpline can also be used to make an appointment for pregnancy choices and post pregnancy counselling.

ICNI also provide free leaflets on various forms of contraception and sexually transmitted infections. To place an order please contact our helpline or email info@informingchoicesni.org. A full list of all the leaflets we provide can be found at www.informingchoicesni.org/leaflets

ICNI has also produced a new leaflet – Knowing Your Options: Before and after taking emergency contraception – which can be downloaded at the following link

<https://informingchoicesni.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/kyo-contraception.pdf>

SEXUAL HEALTH HELPLINE 028 9031 6100

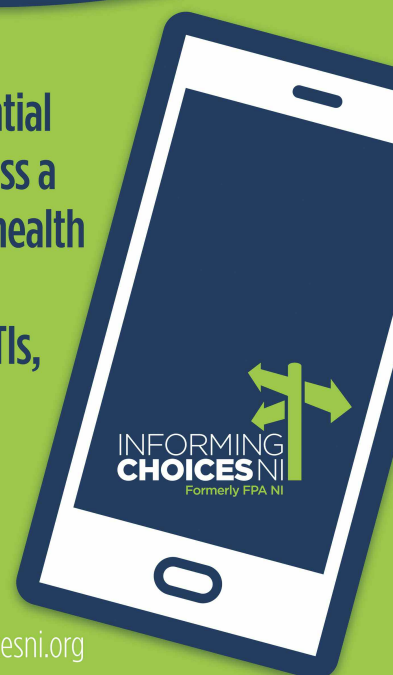
Monday to Friday 9am-5pm

Our helpline can provide confidential information across a range of sexual health areas including contraception, STIs, pregnancy and abortion.

 @ICNI2019

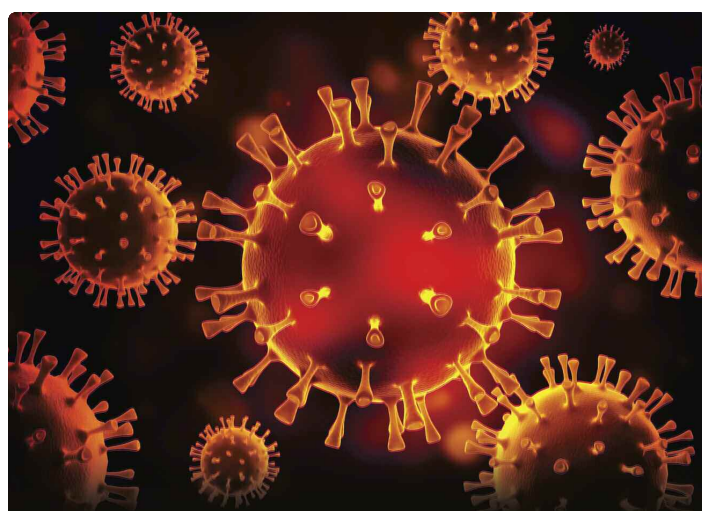
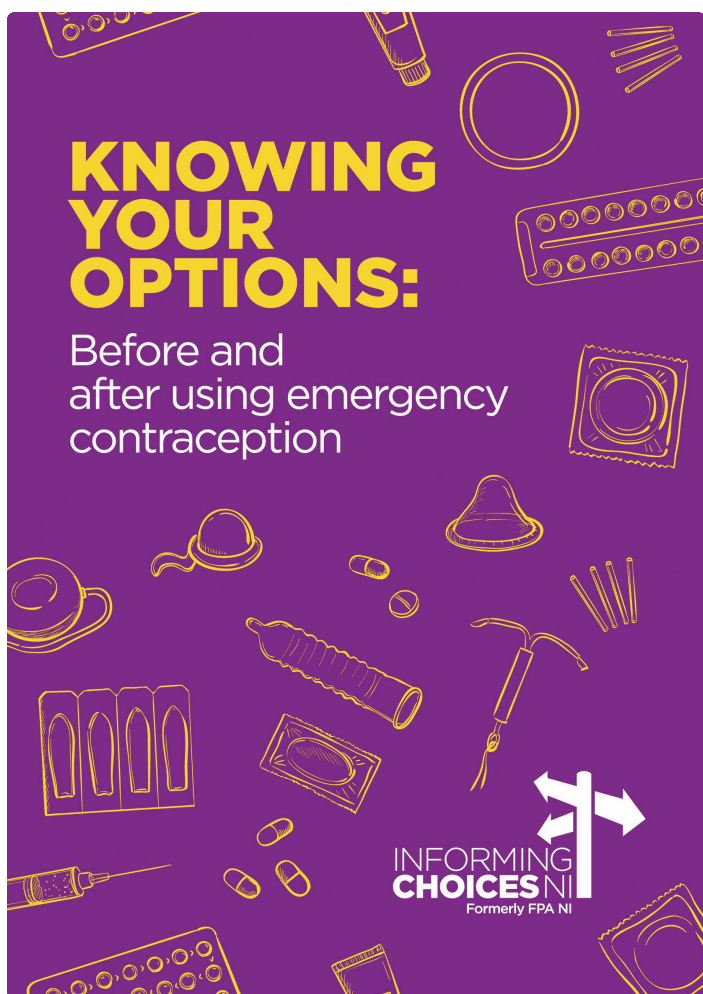
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 www.informingchoicesni.org



KNOWING YOUR OPTIONS:

Before and after using emergency contraception



Preventing the spread of infection

To help prevent the spread of COVID-19 and save lives, everyone should be trying to follow social distancing measures as much as possible. Like seasonal flu, the same public health advice applies for COVID-19: if you cough or sneeze, use a tissue to cover your mouth and nose, throw it away carefully after use, and wash your hands.

The best way to prevent the spread of infections, including COVID-19, is good personal hygiene. This means washing your hands well and often, using soap and water and drying them with paper towels.