

Risky sex habits abroad put wives, girlfriends at risk

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ALMOST all Singaporean men who have casual sex here use condoms, a study has found, but only about half do so when they indulge overseas, putting their girlfriends and wives at risk of contracting Aids.

The results of the study of 800 men by the National University of Singapore (NUS) were revealed yesterday, the final day of the Fourth Singapore Aids Conference, where women's rights groups, Aids experts and academics warned that increasingly risky sex practices among cheating husbands and boyfriends could one day lead to many women here being infected with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) that causes Aids.

The bulk of the 2,213 people affected so far since the virus was first detected here in 1985 are male.

The NUS study was not the only alarm bell on risky behaviour among Singaporean men. Delegates at the two-day meet were told that United Nations Development Fund (Unifem) representatives had interviewed a number of Singaporean men visiting Batam for sex, and found that many believed that unprotected sex with teenage prostitutes there is safe.

They presumed that being young, the girls would not have slept with many men. But that was not true at all, said Unifem Singapore vice-president Saleemah Ismail.

She showed a video of a 14-year-old who had been servicing clients from the age of 12. The girl, said Ms Saleemah, had told her that she had slept with more than 300 men since. The president of the Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware), Ms Braema Mathi, pointed out that every month, at least two women in Singapore are infected. And unlike their male counterparts, more than 60 per cent are married.

Referring to figures quoted by senior Ministry of Health epidemiologist Ye Tun earlier, she said, 'We've seen how in Thailand, the percentage of women infected by their husbands and boyfriends has risen from 5 per cent of all HIV cases to about 50 per cent in a decade.

'We're sitting on a time bomb in Singapore,' she warned.

Associate Professor Wong Mee Lian, who led the recent NUS study which covered only men who slept with prostitutes and included 133 Singaporeans, said that those who did not use condoms when having paid sex outside the country 'gave many excuses' for not doing so. These included condoms not being available and that the prostitutes did not ask them to use one, as they did in Singapore.

She also pointed out that casual sex among men here is also on the rise, going by a separate study conducted by her department of close to 400 Singaporean men interviewed in 2001.

Almost 30 per cent said then that they indulged in casual sex, while in a similar study in 1987, 16 per cent had admitted to it.

Other speakers at the conference also highlighted other forms of risky behaviour. Mr Tan Ee Han, a health adviser to a clinic to control sexually transmitted diseases, which is based at the National Skin Centre, said a survey of masseuses at licensed massage parlours here last year revealed a lot of hanky panky went on in these places.

About 35 per cent said they indulged in 'sexual activities' with clients, which is against Singapore laws.