

INFORMATION SHEET

What is 'PaLS'?

Today's life is full of stresses and strains of one kind or another. For young people, one source of stress may be the school peer group. For example, young people may lose friends, or find it difficult to make friends. Similarly, some young people belong to particular groups or crowds while others may feel excluded. As many of us can remember from our own experience as a teenager, where you are in the school peer group can be a very important matter. It may also affect stress levels and in turn affect health.

The 'PaLS' study is set up to examine the links between pupils' experiences in the school peer group and levels of stress, and the consequences for health and well-being. It is funded by the British Medical Research Council and has been approved by Glasgow University, all relevant local authority education departments, and by the head-teachers of 22 secondary schools involved. Over 4,000 S4 pupils are being asked to take part.

'PaLS' is the first study of its kind in the world and will contribute important knowledge about stress in teenagers and its consequences for health.

What does it involve?

Your teenager will be asked to do three things:

- To complete a questionnaire which contains questions on health and well-being, lifestyles (e.g. smoking), life at home and in school, and friendships and membership of groups. The last questions help us to build up a picture of the school peer group. There are no particularly sensitive questions (e.g. we will not ask about sex).
- To provide two saliva samples, one before completing the questionnaire and one after. In this simple procedure your teenager will be given a tube containing a cotton roll (like a dental swab) which they will keep in their mouth for about 2 minutes and then place back in the tube. The saliva will be analysed for cortisol, which is a hormone released when the body responds to everyday stressors in life.
- To have their height and weight measured and answer a few standard health questions.

And that's it. The whole study takes just one school period.

Confidentiality and anonymity

We take the issue of confidentiality very seriously indeed. Before pupils do the questionnaire, they are told that everything they tell us is confidential (nothing gets back to the school). However, there is one exception to this. Although we don't ask about it, if they choose to tell us about physical or sexual abuse, we have an obligation to inform a responsible adult (normally a teacher who would then inform parents).

Any names on questionnaires will be replaced with an ID to protect pupil anonymity. An ID is necessary so we can link it to measurements of height, weight and cortisol.

The saliva samples will be sent to a laboratory for anonymous cortisol (stress hormone) testing and then destroyed. There is no other measure taken. For example, we are not interested in testing for smoking or DNA. We give an absolute undertaking that cortisol is the only measure of relevance to 'PaLS'.

Your support

We have every confidence that you will support this important study and encourage your teenager to do so. If for any reason, however, you do not wish your teenager to take part please complete the enclosed consent form and return it to the school. If you have any queries about the study, please feel free to contact Catherine Ferrell, our survey manager, on FREEPHONE 0800 389 2129, or e-mail PaLS@msoc.mrc.gla.ac.uk