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Sex survey shows growing diversity, but clichés about men and women still apply

By Carolyn Butler

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When I raised the idea of writing about sex in this column, my editors encouraged me, but my very private husband balked at the prospect of confronting Carrie Bradshawesque dissections of our bedroom habits in his morning paper. Since I can't really blame him for that, I agreed that our sex life was off limits for publication.

Happily, other people's sexual relations are still entirely fair game. And all of a sudden, there's a whole lot more to discuss: Last month, researchers from Indiana University's Center for Sexual Health Promotion published what they said was the most comprehensive national [study](#) on sex in nearly 20 years. Their findings appear in a special issue of the peer-reviewed Journal of Sexual Medicine and include commentary from several prominent sexual-health experts. "This data provides a contemporary snapshot . . . of the sexual landscape," says research scientist and lecturer Debby Herbenick, lead author of the study, which surveyed 5,865 teens and adults from ages 14 to 94.

It is certainly interesting reading. "Because nobody really talks about sex, people are very curious about what their neighbors are doing," says Herbenick.

"Learning more about other people's sex lives provides some type of context about our own lives: whether people are having the same type of sex, with the same frequency and, of course, whether they're enjoying it or not. We want to provide some answers, and help start a conversation between parents and teenagers, friends, partners and a range of people."

So let's talk, then: According to the study, vaginal intercourse remains the most common sex act, although respondents reported more than 40 unique combinations of behaviors during their most recent sexual experience.

"What this shows is that our sexual space has become incredibly diversified," says Michael Reece, director of the Center for Sexual Health Promotion and a co-author of the study, who notes that Americans are having more oral sex than ever before and that a significant number of straight men and women are experimenting with anal sex: More than 40 percent of men and women 25 and older in the survey said they had tried it. "They're not doing it frequently, but they are trying it, and that's something we just didn't see 20 years ago," he explains.

The research also shows that Mom and Dad - and even Grandma and Grandpa - are probably still, well, doing it. Many adults continue to have active, varied sex lives well into their later years, often with longtime partners but even - gasp! - with dates or "friends with benefits," just like college kids.

In the 50-plus age category, 21 percent of women and 16 percent of men had sex most recently with a casual

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partner, while 6 percent and 12 percent respectively had sex with a friend.

"Conventional wisdom says that young people are out there having lots of sex and being promiscuous, while older adults have their act together and aren't having sex in later stages, but these data show frequent sex behaviors across the life span, for people well into the later ages," says Reece. He speculates that the advent of drugs such as Viagra, increased exposure to Internet pornography and media influences such as, yes, "Sex and the City," have affected sexual attitudes and behavior since the last study of this kind.

Still, just because they're older doesn't mean that adults are any wiser.

Indeed, this research, which was funded by the maker of Trojan condoms, shows that people older than 40 have the lowest rates of condom use. Specifically, among singles older than 50 who reported more than one sexual partner in the last year or who had sex outside a relationship, just under than one-third of men and women used such protection during sex with a new acquaintance. In addition, nearly 40 percent of older people had never been tested for HIV.

"These are older generations who were probably married at the time [that the AIDS crisis unfolded] and who didn't acknowledge that any of the widespread safer-sex messages were for them, and who now find themselves single at 40, 45 or later, and they are having sex with good old Mrs. Jones, the librarian from down the street, who couldn't possibly have herpes, but then find themselves infected," says Robin Sawyer, an associate professor and instructor in human sexuality at the University of Maryland.

We also aren't always on the same page when it comes to pleasure: About 85 percent of men report that their partner had an orgasm the last time they had sex, while only 64 percent of women said they did. In addition, 30 percent of women experienced pain during their last sexual encounter, compared with just 5 percent of men.

"The take-home message [of both of these discrepancies] is that for people to have pleasurable, satisfying sex lives, it's always helpful to communicate, to ask each other how things are going, how things feel, to ask if there are things your partner wants done differently," says Herbenick.

Not surprisingly, the differences don't end once the sex is done. In fact, a recent study on post-coital behaviors published in the Journal of Sex Research suggests that every gender-difference cliché you've ever heard is true.

According to this small study of 99 women and 71 men, women are more interested in bonding after sex, through kissing, cuddling and talking about their relationship.

Men, on the other hand, are much less likely to want to make a connection, especially in short-term relationships, and more apt to want to have more sex or "engage in other, extrinsically rewarding activities - to smoke, drink, get a snack, ask for favors, things like that," says study co-author Susan Hughes, an associate professor of psychology at Albright College in Reading, Pa., who speculates that ancient biological differences related to reproductive strategies may be at play.

So is the post-coital cold shoulder inevitable? Deborah Fox, a certified sex therapist in Washington, says no. "Men and women have a lot of differences, and we need to learn to talk and to really understand each other's needs and stories and experiences," whether it's before, during or after sex, she explains.

So I guess that means that even if, like my husband, you're not up for talking about your sex life in print or another public forum, it probably couldn't hurt to discuss these issues more in the privacy of your own home.

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