



Perspective

Changes in sexual behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic: Patterns and recommendations

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended lifestyles, routines, and relationships with significant physical and mental health implications. Sexual health, behavior, and functioning have been affected but have received comparatively little attention. In this article, we do not provide a comprehensive overview of the impact of the pandemic on sexual functioning; instead, we examine fundamental changes in sexual behavior during the ongoing pandemic and provide some recommendations for enhancing the sexual health of individuals as well as couples. There is a distinct need to reinvent intimacy and relationships to enable a more fulfilling sexual experience.

Introduction

The ongoing coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak, caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), was declared as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020. As part of the pandemic containment measures, several nations worldwide began implementing lockdown

orders that mainly involve wide restrictions on movement and in-person interactions: hence, appeared the terms "social distancing" and "physical distancing".

These measures have significantly impacted lifestyles, routines, and relationships, including sexual contact, in several ways. The pandemic's deleterious effects on societal relationships, including social relations among peers and partners, have engendered frustration and loneliness among the public (Ibarra et al., 2020).

The situation is even more bothersome among families experiencing movement

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restrictions: staying together too often or staying apart for a long time. Though most of the nations have initiated measures for safe unlocking during recent times, people find it difficult to engage with others socially and emotionally. Notwithstanding the significant implications of COVID-19 on sexual and reproductive health (Hussein, 2020), these aspects have received relatively lesser attention amongst the researchers, the media, and the like during the present pandemic.

This article focuses mainly on two aspects: changes in sexual behavior and functioning during the pandemic and recommendations for preserving sexual health and well-being during the pandemic.

Changes in sexual behaviour during the pandemic

Changes in sexual practices

Studies have shown that the rates of people watching porn sites, downloading dating apps in the smartphone, reading erotic posts on social media have increased specifically during the lockdown phases of the pandemic (Ibarra et al., 2020; Lehmler et al., 2020). Some partners have revealed new additions to their sexual life (trying new sexual positions, sexting, sharing sexual fantasies, cybersex activities, etc.), making their sexual life less affected by pandemic restrictions (Lehmler et al., 2020).

Risk of COVID-19 transmission during sexual activity

Recent studies on Covid-19 virus transmission have revealed that the virus is present abundantly in the oral and nasal secretions and is transmitted via droplets and fomites, sometimes even in stools of infected patients. Consequently, acts of kissing (oral-oral) and anilingus (feco-oral) and sexual activity carry an inherent risk of virus transmission due to physical intimacy leading to anxiety among partners engaged in sexual relationships.

Patterns of sexual dysfunction

Desire

One of the most reported sexual dysfunction symptoms during the pandemic is reduced desire or desire discrepancy (where one partner reports lower desire and the other has normal or enhanced desire) (Ibarra et al., 2020). Another observational study found that the sexual desire levels significantly increased during the pandemic due to increased time spent at home with the partner (Yuksel & Ozgor, 2020a). Interestingly, these authors also found that desire to get pregnant has also significantly come down due to concerns regarding safety and access to health care during the pandemic.

Arousal

Erectile dysfunction (ED) is another common symptom reported exclusively by men. Literature reveals that obesity, metabolic syndrome, diabetes, hypertension, obstructive airway disease, habits like smoking are associated with an increased risk for ED. It must be noted that such factors independently and collectively are associated with an increased risk for contracting COVID-19 infection (Banerjee & Rao, 2020; Ibarra et al., 2020). Hence, the sexual functioning of men with medical comorbidity needs to be closely monitored during this pandemic as they are at an increased risk of mortality.

Frequency

One of the earliest studies on sexual functioning and practices during the pandemic found that nearly half (45%) of participants reported an impact of the pandemic on their sex life, with marginally increased sexual engagement and positive emotional changes bonding (Arafat et al., 2020). The frequency of sexual activity has increased in partners compared to their

baseline frequency levels (Arafat et al., 2020; Yuksel & Ozgor, 2020a). Perceived emotional bonding levels have increased proportionately to the increased frequency of sexual activity (Arafat et al., 2020).

Contrary reports suggest that the overall frequency of solo and partnered sexual acts has decreased due to severe restrictions on movement (Lehmiller et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020). Reports suggest that the overall quality of sexual life has deteriorated during this pandemic (Li et al., 2020; Yuksel & Ozgor, 2020a). Sexual abstinence and sexual oppression during pandemic times have led to adverse physical and emotional outcomes (Banerjee & Rao, 2020).

All the above studies incorporated only subjective measures, and self-reporting, amidst the constantly changing situation of the pandemic, is subject to future modification (Bing 2020). More research is required for the sexual health of vulnerable sub-groups such as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) people and those with Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS).

Recommendations for preserving sexual well-being during the pandemic

People living separately from their regular partners

It may be difficult for such couples to leave their homes due to lockdowns and restrictions in movement. With the advent of community spread of the pandemic, asymptomatic carriers may also spread the infection, and thus, physical sex is not entirely safe or feasible for persons living separately.

Couples must, therefore, explore other ways to reinvent and maintain intimacy. Alternative options here include sexting,

sharing sexual fantasies, and playing erotic games (Lopes et al., 2020). Video dating with a partner or sharing intimate emails have also been suggested (Corrado, 2020). These are some ways to fulfill the human need for intimacy while ensuring personal safety and contributing to infection control by avoiding physical contact.

People with no regular sexual partner

Sexual abstinence may be the safest measure, but this is not always desirable or feasible. Further, abstaining from sex has been linked to guilt and low self-esteem. In the form of masturbation, self-gratification can be a safe way to meet sexual needs (Turban et al., 2020). Individuals may utilize the self-isolation period as an opportunity to explore their sexual fantasies and learn more about pleasuring oneself and sex in general, through educational material available on the internet. Evidence has shown that sexual fantasies and subjective desires are key mediators for a satisfactory sexual experience (Regnerus et al., 2017).

Hence, the quarantine period may be viewed as a time to know more about one's sexual behavior and, if possible, make new friends and renew social bonds.

Couples in isolation together

Normal sexual practices, including intercourse, may be continued for asymptomatic, in isolation, and without a history of any exposure. For those with a history of exposure, sexual practices can continue at a reduced frequency. In both cases, all adequate risk reduction precautions must be taken because it is possible that any or both partners can be asymptomatic carriers (Banerjee & Rao, 2020).

Interestingly, the quality of time spent with each other can vary within couples despite remaining confined to homes. For some, it

may spell difficulties in respecting personal space and privacy amidst sharing domestic chores and facing up to the opposing habits of partners. Increased and erratic working hours, due to vagaries of work at home, may mean that sex is the last thing on their minds. For others, stay-at-home orders may indisputably mean more time for sexual engagement. Whatever the situation, it is necessary that couples communicate more openly about their sexual preferences and desires, set boundaries, share time, and reinvent intimacy so that sexual activity is more fulfilling (Lopes et al., 2020).

Preserving mental health for better sexual health

The present pandemic has significantly impacted the mental health of the general population (Krishnamoorthy et al., 2020); this may be due to fears of contracting the infection and the need for quarantine/self-isolation. These concerns may be more pronounced among high-risk subgroups, such as frontline health care workers (Menon & Padhy, 2020). Further, the quality of interpersonal relationships between partners may negatively affect the quality of sexual experience and further worsen physical and mental health.

On the contrary, positive perceptions of relationships, support, and intimacy have been associated with reduced stress and increased perceptions of health in general (Farrell & Simpson, 2017). Therefore, couples must look for new ways to enhance the quality of relationships amidst the general disorganization in life, routines, and jobs. Adapting and reinventing one's relationship and oneself is key because of the large-scale disruptions and uncertainty wrought by the pandemic.

Conclusion

There remains little doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has upended relationships, intimacy, and sexual engagement practices

among couples. Problems with sexual desire, arousal, increased, and decreased frequency of sexual engagement have all been reported. It is necessary for couples to stay together to strengthen intimacy and quality of relationships to enable fulfilling sexual experience. Those physically separated from their partner must reinvent sexual relationships, while those with no regular sexual partner must explore their sexual behavior. Whether the pandemic will produce sweeping changes in sexual behavior and activity remain a matter of conjecture at present due to a lack of studies. It is then recommended that couples and individuals openly discuss their sexual health, follow risk mitigation practices, and lay emphasis on discovering new methods of intimacy to improve physical, mental, and sexual health.

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