

Chapter Sex

What Is Normal Sexuality?

You may have read magazine or online surveys reporting sensational information on sexual practices. According to one, men can reach orgasm 15 or more times a day (in reality, such ability is rare), and women fantasize about being raped. (Women do have idealized fantasies of submission in the context of being desired, but these fantasies are far from imagining an actual rape [Critelli & Bivona, 2008].) Surveys like this fail us on two counts: First, they claim to reveal sexual norms, but they are actually reporting mostly distorted half-truths. Second, the facts they present typically are not based on any scientific methodology that would make them reliable, although they do sell magazines.¹

What is normal sexual behavior? As you will see, it depends. More to the point, when is sexual behavior that is somewhat different from the norm a disorder? Again, it depends. Current views tend to be quite tolerant of a variety of sexual expressions, even if they are unusual, unless the behavior is associated with a substantial impairment in functioning or involves nonconsenting individuals such as children. Two kinds of sexual behavior meet this definition. Individuals with sexual dysfunction find it difficult to function adequately while having sex; for example, they may not become aroused or achieve orgasm. In paraphilic disorders, the relatively new term for sexual deviation, sexual arousal occurs primarily in the context of inappropriate objects or individuals. Philia refers to a strong attraction or liking, and para indicates the attraction is abnormal. Paraphilic arousal patterns tend to be focused rather narrowly, often precluding mutually consenting adult partners, even if desired. In actuality, paraphilic disorders have little to do with sexual dysfunctions except for the fact that they both involve sexual behavior. For this reason, paraphilic disorders now comprise a separate category of disorders in DSM-5. Another condition that has been separated from sexual disorders altogether is gender dysphoria. In gender dysphoria there is incongruence and psychological distress and dissatisfaction with the gender one has been assigned at birth (boy or girl). The disorder is not sexual but rather a disturbance in the person's sense of being a male or a female. Before describing these three conditions, we return to our initial question, "What is normal sexual behavior?" to gain an important perspective, particularly on sexual dysfunctions and paraphilic disorders. We spend a bit more time on what is "normal" in this chapter, compared to other chapters since so many misconceptions exist.

Determining the prevalence of sexual practices accurately requires careful surveys that randomly sample the population. In a scientifically sound survey, Mosher, Chandra, and Jones (2005) reported data from 12,571 men and women in the United States ages 15 to 44, as part of the National Survey of Family Growth by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). These data are presented in figure on the next page. The participants were interviewed, which is more reliable than having them fill out a questionnaire, and the responses were analyzed in detail. The most recent survey from the National Survey of Family Growth sponsored by CDC was reported in 2011 (Chandra, Mosher, & Copen, 2011). More than 13,000 men and women participated in this study, which provides some updated data, although the areas of sexual behavior sampled were more limited.

Virtually all men and women studied by Mosher and colleagues and Chandra and colleagues were sexually experienced, with vaginal intercourse a nearly universal experience, even for those who had never been married. Even by age 15, over a quarter of males and females have engaged in vaginal intercourse, and the prevalence rate increases steadily with the age of individuals (see figure 1 on page 3). In the study by Chandra and colleagues (2011) who sampled men and women ages 25-44, (see figure 2 on page 3) we see that most all had engaged in intercourse and oral sex with the opposite sex. Interestingly, 44% of man and 36% of women had ever engaged in anal sex with the opposite sex. And 6% of men and 12% of women had ever had sex with the same sex (defined as: For females - sexual contact with another female and for males defined as – oral or anal sex with another male).

¹ The author is telling us that surveys in Men's Health (for example) should be interpreted with great caution. On the other, scientific surveys done correctly can be very accurate.

As far as number of lifetime partners, an earlier finding by Billy and colleagues (1993) found that that 23.3% of men had had sex with 20 or more partners, which is another high-risk behavior along with anal sex. Then again, maybe most men aren't as promiscuous as we think: more than 70% had had only 1 sexual partner during the previous year, and fewer than 10% had had 4 or more partners during the same period. The Chandra and colleagues study (2011) (reported in table 1 on page 3) reports similar figures, with 21.4% of men having sex with 15 or more partners during their lifetime (compared with 8.2% of women). Chandra also reports that the median number of partners for men at age 44 is 6.4 and for women similarly aged the median is 3.4. Also, only 6.0% of men and 2.9% of women reported 4 or more partners during the past year.

Another interesting set of data counters the many views we have of sexuality among older adults. Sexual behavior can continue well into old age, even past 80 for some people. Table 2 on page 3 presents the percentage by age group of older individuals in a community sample who were sexually active and continuing to have sexual intercourse (Lindau et al., 2007). Notably, 38.5% of men and 16.7% of women aged 75 to 85 were sexually active. Reasons for the discrepancy between men and women are not clear, although given the earlier mortality of men, many older women lack a suitable partner; it is also possible that some women are married to men in an older age bracket. Many older women also indicated that sex was "not at all important" and generally reported less interest in sex than their male counterparts. Decreases in sexual activity are mostly correlated with decreases in general mobility and various disease processes and consequent medication, which may reduce arousal. Furthermore, the speed and intensity of various vasocongestive responses decrease with age. A large study of older individuals around the world, aged 40 to 80, found that good physical and mental health, as well as a good relationship with a partner, were the best predictors of sexual well-being (Laumann et al., 2006).

From: Abnormal Psy Barlow and Durand 8th Ed. As well as some original articles.

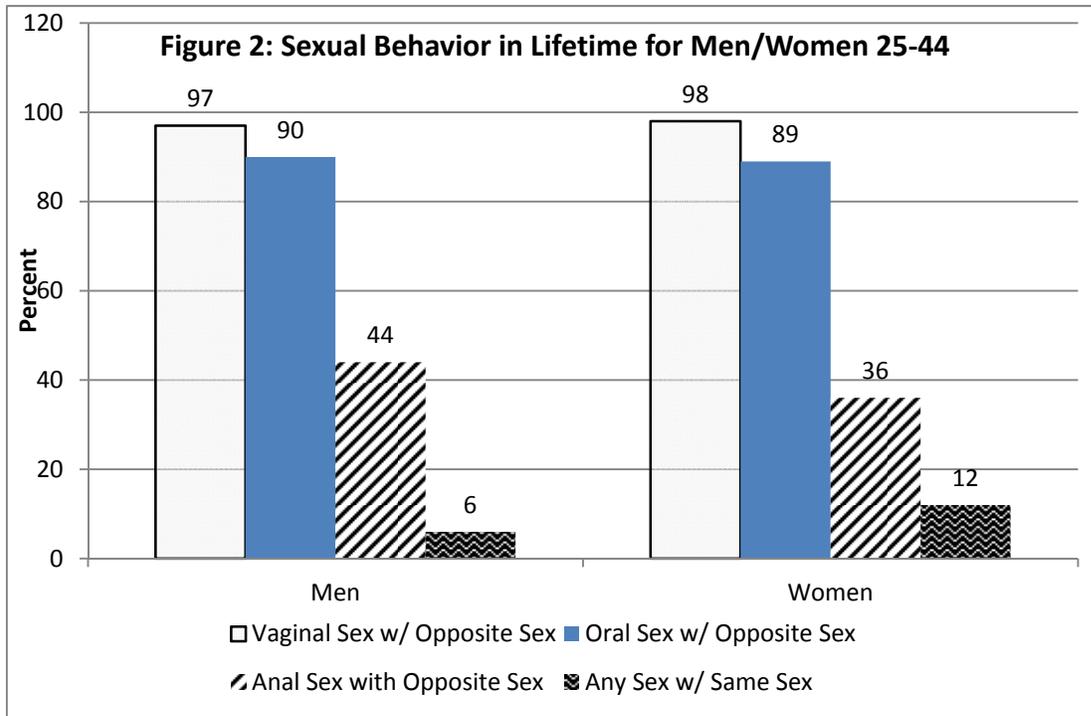
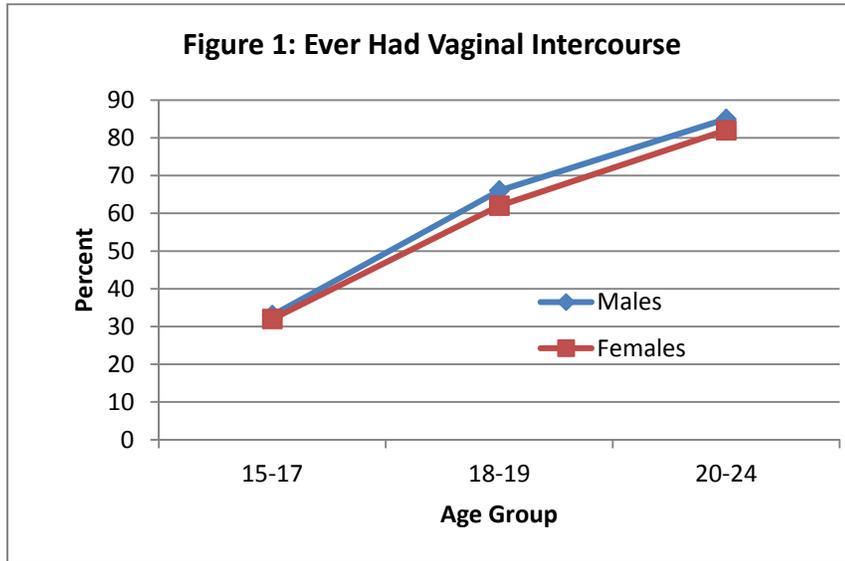


Table 1: Number of Opposite Sex Partners in Lifetime (at age 44)

	0	1 or less	2 or less	6 or less	14 or less	15 or more	Median #
Males	11.4	26.4	34	60.5	78.6	21.4	6.4
Females	11.3	33.5	44.2	75.8	91.8	8.2	3.4

Table 2: Prevalence of Sexual Activity in Older Adults Classified by Age and Sex

Age	Sexual Activity with a Partner			
	In last 12 months		≥ 2-3 times/month	
57-64	83.7	61.6	67.5	62.6
65-74	67.0	39.5	65.4	65.4
75-85	38.5	16.7	54.2	54.1