

Sex and relationships following childbirth: a first report from general practice of 131 couples

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SUMMARY

Changes in a couple's sexual relationship following childbirth may be more significant than previous studies have suggested. Around 50% of first-time parents in this study described their sex life as 'poor' or 'not very good' eight months after the birth of their baby, and one in five said that they would like help for this. First-time parents rating their general relationship as 'poor' or 'not very good' rose from 1% before pregnancy to 20% eight months after childbirth. Changes in the general relationship and the quality of sex life were associated in these couples.

Keywords: sexual relationships; childbirth; surveys.

Introduction

EARLY research on postnatal sexual behaviour suggested that libido returned to normal for most women within four weeks of birth,¹ and that, by six weeks, sexual function had returned to pre-pregnancy levels or better.²

In contrast, a later study of 119 first-time mothers attending an antenatal clinic at a London teaching hospital revealed that 60% of females were having sexual intercourse less frequently at the 26 weeks postnatal stage compared with before the pregnancy,³ though sexual enjoyment was not affected.

This study aimed to examine, in a general practice setting, changes in the sexual and general relationship of couples following childbirth.

Method

The setting was a semi-rural population in mid-Devon of around 16 000 patients covered by 10 general practitioners working from two practices with an average Jarman index of -2.

All couples completing their first or second pregnancy between 1 April 1993 and 1 April 1995 entered the study. Each partner was given a questionnaire by the health visitor at the eight-month baby check, which was coded in order to preserve anonymity. Answers were sent in a stamped addressed envelope to the research coordinator.

Statistical analysis was carried out using SPSS for Windows version 7.5 software. Continuous data were examined using correlation coefficients. Ordinal data were analysed using chi-squared tests, with Fisher's exact test for tables with any expected cell frequency fewer than five, and a linear association test if

appropriate, or Mann-Whitney U and Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-rank tests for grouped or paired data as appropriate. Somers -d statistic was used to examine the association between two ordinal variables.

Results

The overall response rate for questionnaires was 61.7% (78 and 53 responses from first- and second-time mothers respectively). A significant fall in the number of episodes of sexual activity was reported eight months after the birth of the baby for both males and females in both first and second pregnancies ($P < 0.001$). Around two-thirds of women reported five or fewer episodes of intercourse per month eight months after childbirth.

There was also a significant deterioration ($P < 0.001$) in the quality of the sexual relationship among first-time parents. Forty-four per cent of females and 50% of males described their sex life as 'poor' or 'not very good'. Seventeen per cent of first-time parents said that they would like help with sexual problems compared with 7.5% of second-time parents.

Thirty-eight per cent of females and 47% of males who had had their first baby thought that there had been a deterioration in their general relationship (6% and 3% respectively thought that it had improved). Changes in the quality of the general relationship were associated with changes in the quality of sex life for first-time parents ($P < 0.001$ according to the separate reports of both females and males). There was a lesser association for parents who had already had a baby ($P = 0.11$ for females and 0.181 for males).

Primiparae most commonly complained of lack of libido (35%) and tiredness (38%). For multiparae, tiredness (67%) appeared to be a more significant factor than lack of libido (14%).

Discussion

This study is limited, as the simple questionnaire was not validated and retrospective reporting by couples of their pre-pregnancy situation may have been unreliable.

Nevertheless, it does suggest that changes in sexual relationships may be greater than previously reported. Dissatisfaction with the general relationship was less usual, with 20% of female and male partners feeling that their relationship was either 'poor' or 'not very good' eight months after the birth of their first child (compared with 1% to 2% prior to conception). This level of unsatisfactory relationships in the postnatal period is similar to the average in general practice (15%)⁴ and would suggest that the quality of general relationship at conception is above average.

The association between the quality of the general and sexual relationship does not imply causality but does suggest that sexual dissatisfaction in a relationship could be a marker for a more general problem in the relationship and vice versa.

The whole subject of sex in early parenthood has been described as one of our last taboos.⁵ Couples who are having difficulties can be reassured that this is very common and can be referred to relevant texts.⁵

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Table 1. Summary of results.

	First pregnancy				Second pregnancy			
	Women (78)		Men (60)		Women (53)		Men (41)	
	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After
Quality of relationship								
Good (%)	80	57 ^a	84	48 ^a	94	69 ^a	93	63 ^a
Quite good (%)	19	23	14	29	6	29	7	35
Not very good (%)	1	16	2	21	0	2	0	2
Poor (%)	0	4	0	2	0	0	0	0
Quality of sex life								
Good (%)	65	30 ^a	69	28 ^a	72	37 ^a	54	34 ^a
Quite good (%)	30	26	24	25	22	33	37	22
Not very good (%)	4	27	5	22	6	24	7	29
Poor (%)	1	17	2	25	0	6	2	15
Sexual activity								
Intercourse/month	10.3	5.1 ^a	11.5	5.1 ^a	11.8	7.6 ^a	9.9	6.5 ^a
≤5 per month (%)	29	64 ^a	15	47 ^a	23	70 ^a	24	54 ^a

Categorical data were compared using Mann-Whitney U test, continuous data using t-tests. ^aSignificance of difference between before and after values: P<0.001. Combined overall scores for couples have been omitted from the table for simplicity. They equate almost exactly to the sum of gender scores, differences being minor and associated with missing data.

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