
Sex in the U.S. Is Up 20% and Dr. Westoff Tells Why

By **Landon Jones** | October 14, 1974 12:00 PM

The United States has apparently undergone a silent revolution in the bedroom, in both its sexual habits and family planning. Infant mortality is at an all-time low; abortion has been legalized; the pill is now used by 22 percent of women of childbearing age, and voluntary sterilization is on the upsurge. As a result, the U.S. population is beginning to stabilize—while, apparently, U.S. couples are enjoying more sex than ever before. A close student of these trends is Dr. Charles F. Westoff, 47, professor of sociology and associate director of Princeton's Office of Population Research. His latest study, based on interviews with 5,600 married women across the country, showed, among other things, an unexpected 20 percent increase in sexual activity since the first National Fertility Study in 1965. To discuss the significance of his findings, Dr. Westoff recently talked with Landon Jones of PEOPLE.

Why have you tried to find out how often married couples in the United States have sexual intercourse?

I'm not interested so much in that subject as I am interested in its relationship to various methods of contraception. We wanted to see whether increased use in recent years of the more modern methods of contraception—notably the pill, the IUD and sterilization—would have the effect of increasing coital frequency among couples. We guessed that it might, because these methods would increase the spontaneity of sexual behavior and would decrease anxiety about unwanted pregnancy.

How did you find out about it?

The following question was asked in both the 1965 and the 1970 National

Fertility Studies: “In the past four weeks, how many times have you had intercourse?” Even though the question was buried in an antiseptic context of queries about pregnancy, fertility and sterility, our interviewers reported that the subject of coital frequency was awkward and anxiety-provoking. For example, when asked about their frequency of intercourse in a four-week period, most of the women replied in multiples of four. This suggests that most women arrived at a figure for a “typical” week and multiplied by four.

What did the statistics indicate about the frequency of sexual intercourse?

We started by looking at the relationship between coital frequency and method of contraception. Then I noticed, almost in passing, that there seemed to be a 20 percent increase in frequency of sexual intercourse among married couples under 45 between 1965 and 1970. For all women, the average frequency in four weeks had increased from 6.8 times in 1965 to 8.2 times in 1970. The rise was apparent regardless of method of contraception—and even where no method was used.

What was your preliminary explanation for this increase?

I was very curious. I tried to explain the increase at first by looking at obvious reasons, such as the fact that the entire population was younger in 1970 than in 1965, and we know that young people have a higher frequency. That explained only a small part of the increase. I then reasoned that the increased use of the most effective birth control methods, like the pill, might explain the increase. Again, that accounted for some of the increase but not all of it.

Did you have any doubts about the reported increase?

I was not sure. It could have been that the apparent increase was not real, but rather a reporting phenomenon. That is, because of the more permissive atmosphere surrounding sex, people talk about it much more freely than before and perhaps even feel a pressure to be “with it.” The reported increase in sexual activity could be a matter of exaggeration in 1970 and/or under-reporting in 1965.

How did you resolve this “exaggeration factor”?

There is only one test, and it is hardly definitive: the length of time it took to get pregnant. Much to my surprise, we found a substantial change which, quite fortuitously, also showed up as a 20 percent reduction in the time required to conceive.

What methods of contraception appear to increase the frequency of sex?

The amount of sex is much higher with the most effective methods of contraception. Women using the pill report a nearly 25 percent higher frequency—10 times in four weeks—than is reported by women using all other methods combined (about eight times in four weeks). High frequencies are also reported by women who are using the IUD or whose husbands have had vasectomies. The lowest frequencies are associated with the rhythm method, the douche and female sterilization, and by those who use methods dependent upon the man—such as the condom and withdrawal. We’ve also noticed that the frequency goes down sharply and directly if the couple decides to end child-bearing.

What other factors may have contributed to the increase in sex?

I can only speculate about that. The increasing availability of legal abortion has reduced some anxieties about unwanted pregnancies. There has been an increase in openness and permissiveness about sex in our society during this period. Divorce rates also have been going up and the average duration of marriage was shorter in 1970 than in 1965. To put it another way, more women were on their honeymoons in 1970 than in 1965.

Do certain kinds of people have sex more or less often than others?

Yes. We found that women answering with the most “modern” views about woman’s role in society also reported a higher frequency of sexual relations. We learned that the frequency increases with the level of education of the wife, from an average of 7.4 times in four weeks for women with less than four years of high school to 8.7 for women with some college education. And

women who work to have a “career” show a higher frequency than those who work mainly for money.

Is it true that sterilization is increasing as a method of birth control?

Right now, male or female sterilization is the single most popular method of contraception for married couples over the age of 30.

Why does female sterilization seem to inhibit sexual activity and male sterilization seem to promote it?

My guess is that you have two totally different kinds of populations here. The vasectomy appeals primarily to well-educated, middle-class men who are intolerant of the inconvenience and ineffectiveness of conventional contraception and who may want increased sexual activity. On the other hand, women who are sterilized—usually with tubal ligations—tend to be of lower education and lower income. They are probably motivated more by fear of getting pregnant than by the opportunity for more convenient sex.

What do your studies indicate about current fertility trends in the U.S.?

For one thing, we now know that there has been a high failure rate of different kinds of contraceptives over the past 20 years. Until recently, a woman wishing to avoid pregnancy still had a one-in-three chance of getting pregnant over a five-year period. With the increased use of more effective methods, however, that probability has most likely been cut in half. And we have documented a revolution in birth control methods among U.S. Roman Catholics that amounts to a mass defection from traditional Catholic teachings. We have also found a large increase in the proportion of American women in favor of abortion. As a result of this, while sexual activity is evidently increasing in the United States, the birth rate continues to go down.

Have your studies indicated what would be the result if couples could predetermine the sex of their children?

We have some idea. While the overall male/female ratio would not change much, there is a strong tendency for couples to prefer a boy first, then a girl. A large increase in first-born males would mean that whatever personality traits are associated with the first born would be heavily concentrated in the male population. We might thus wind up with more aggressive men.

Why do we need to know that couples are having sexual relations more often these days in the United States?

Actually, this figure is only a minor aspect of our larger examination of fertility in this country. The only reason it has received so much attention is because it's a subject everybody's naturally curious about. Sexual relations within marriage are a fundamental part of human behavior. Our study does make a modest contribution toward establishing some of the norms of sexual behavior of married couples.