

COUPLES

A New Baby in the Bedroom: Frequency and Severity of Postpartum Sexual Concerns and Their Associations With Relationship Satisfaction in New Parent Couples



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ABSTRACT

Introduction: New parents are faced with many novel stressors, including possible changes to their sexual relationships. Although postpartum sexual concerns appear to be pervasive in new parents, little is known about the severity of these concerns or how they relate to new mothers' and fathers' relationship satisfaction.

Aim: To describe the frequency and severity of postpartum sexual concerns and examine associations between frequency and severity of postpartum sexual concerns and relationship satisfaction in new-parent couples.

Methods: Participants were 239 new-parent couples of a healthy infant 3 to 12 months old. Both members of the parenting couple completed an online survey within 1 month of each other.

Main Outcome Measures: Frequency and severity of postpartum sexual concerns were assessed using a 20-item Likert-type questionnaire adapted from a previously validated measurement. Relationship satisfaction was assessed with the Couples Satisfaction Index.

Results: A wide range of postpartum sexuality concerns was highly prevalent and moderately distressing in new mothers and fathers alike. New fathers' greater severity of postpartum sexual concerns was associated with their own and new mothers' decreased relationship satisfaction, whereas new mothers' greater severity of postpartum sexual concerns was associated only with lower relationship satisfaction in new fathers. In addition, new mothers' greater frequency of postpartum sexual concerns was associated with their own and new fathers' lower relationship satisfaction, whereas new fathers' frequency of postpartum sexual concerns was unrelated to the couples' relationship satisfaction.

Conclusion: Postpartum sexual concerns are pervasive and moderately distressing in new parents. The increased frequency and severity of these concerns were associated with decreased relationship well-being in both members of the couple. New mothers might need more assistance adjusting to the number of sexual concerns that they are experiencing, whereas new fathers might need more help adjusting to distress related to sexual issues.

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Key Words: Postpartum Sexuality; Parenthood; Relationship Satisfaction; Postpartum Sexual Health; Couples

INTRODUCTION

During the first year after childbirth, new parents are faced with many personal and interpersonal changes, including changes to their sexual relationship.^{1,2} Specifically, most new parents experience sexual concerns (ie, questions or worries related to their sexuality³) unique to the postpartum period. For

example, new parents have reported concerns about when to reinitiate sexual intercourse after childbirth, pain during intercourse, the impact of body image concerns on sexual activity, and discrepancies in sexual desire between members of the couple (eg, ^{3–8}). To our knowledge, only one study has directly assessed the frequency of postpartum sexual concerns.³ The investigators found that, in a sample of more than 200 new parents, as many as 89% of new mothers and 82% of new fathers endorsed at least one postpartum sexual concern, and approximately half of all new parents experienced multiple postpartum sexual concerns during the first year after childbirth.³ Women who had cesarean deliveries reported a greater frequency of concerns than those who had a vaginal delivery, whereas other delivery-related factors (eg, instrumental deliveries, episiotomies or vaginal tearing) and breastfeeding were unrelated to the number of concerns.³

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The most prevalent sexual concerns appeared to be similar in new mothers and fathers and included worries about when to safely resume intercourse, when to initiate the use of birth control, the impact of physical recovery from childbirth on sexuality, changes in mothers' body image after childbirth, and discrepancies in sexual desire in which new mothers reported lower desire than their partners.^{3,9} Despite the high prevalence of postpartum sexual concerns, with the exception of time to resumption of intercourse, these issues are infrequently discussed with health care providers, possibly because of physicians' limited knowledge of or comfort with postpartum sexual changes and concerns.^{5,10,11}

The available research on the frequency and content of postpartum sexual concerns in new parents is limited by its reliance on data collected from only one member of the parenting couple (eg, ¹²), thus hindering knowledge on how postpartum sexual concerns can vary and affect both members of the couple. Previous research has shown sex differences in the struggles encountered by new parents such that new mothers tend to experience increased stress, concerns about changes in body shape, and doubts about parenting competence, whereas new fathers experience increased concerns regarding finances and decreases in their partner's sexual interest.^{2,9,13–16} These data suggest that postpartum sexual concerns also can vary within mixed-sex parenting couples. If this is the case, then sex-specific interventions tailored to new mothers and fathers could be more effective in curbing postpartum sexual concerns and any negative effects that such concerns might have on new parents' relationships. In addition, new parents might perceive some postpartum sexual concerns as trivial or transient, whereas others might be associated with substantial distress and diminished well-being. In addition, some new parents might endorse a great number of concerns that they are not that bothered by, whereas others might have only a few concerns that are quite distressing. The present study aimed to assess the frequency and severity of postpartum sexual concerns in both members of the parenting couple.

The postpartum period is associated with unique declines in a couple's relationship satisfaction, which is defined as the subjective global evaluation of the positive and negative aspects of one's romantic relationship.^{2,17–23} Parents show significantly steeper declines in relationship satisfaction compared with non-parents, even after controlling for confounding variables such as relationship length,^{20,24} and these deteriorations appear to persist long term.¹⁸ Given that sexual and relationship satisfaction are interdependent,²⁵ a greater number and severity of postpartum sexual concerns can negatively affect the relationship satisfaction of new parents. Indeed, of the limited available research, decreases in sexual frequency, desire, and satisfaction postpartum have consistently been linked with relationship dissatisfaction.^{12,17} There are potential consequences for the new child: marital conflict has been found to negatively affect the parent-child relationship and the infant's socioemotional health

and subsequent development.^{26,27} Therefore, it is important to identify whether sexual concerns might be a risk factor for decreased relationship satisfaction in the postpartum period. This knowledge could be used to develop interventions targeted at lessening postpartum sexual concerns. An important aspect of sexual health care is proactively targeting sexual health concerns²⁸; however, new parents are often reluctant to seek help for sexual problems.²² An improved understanding of postpartum sexual concerns and their associations with relationship well-being could encourage health care providers to address these issues during a highly vulnerable transition in couples' lives.

Studies examining sexuality and relationship satisfaction in postpartum couples are typically conducted at the individual level.²² However, an individual's relationship satisfaction is likely to be affected by the perceptions and experiences of each member of the parenting couple.²² As a result, individuals' postpartum sexual concerns can affect their own and their partners' relationship satisfaction. Indeed, dyadic research with community and clinical samples has demonstrated that relationship satisfaction is inherently interdependent, such that the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of the individuals within a couple influence their own and their partner's relationship satisfaction.^{29–32}

AIMS

In an online sample of new-parent couples, the aims of this study were to (i) describe the frequency and severity of postpartum sexual concerns and (ii) examine the associations between frequency and severity of postpartum sexual concerns and relationship satisfaction. Because all couples in our sample were in mixed-sex relationships, we refer to participants as new mothers and fathers. We hypothesized that new mothers' and fathers' greater frequency and severity of postpartum sexual concerns would be associated with their own and their partner's lower relationship satisfaction. Findings from this study will contribute to an improved understanding of postpartum sexual concerns and their associations with relationship satisfaction to provide clinicians with more nuanced information relevant to effectively addressing these issues in new parent couples.

METHODS

Participants

A convenience sample of couples was recruited across North America from online sources (Kijiji, Craigslist, Reddit, scienceofrelationships.com) from September 2014 to May 2015 as part of a larger, cross-sectional online study on postpartum sexuality and relationships. Other data from the larger study have been published previously.³³ Potential participants were presented with a brief eligibility screener. Inclusion criteria were (i) a couple currently engaged in an intimate relationship with each other, (ii) first-time parents to a healthy singleton child born at 37 to 42 weeks of gestation and 3 to 12 months old at the time

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