

ORIGINAL RESEARCH—EPIDEMIOLOGY & RISK FACTORS

Sexual Function and Fertility Quality of Life in Women Using In Vitro Fertilization

Nicole K. Smith, PhD, MPH,* Jody Madeira, JD, PhD,[†] and Heather R. Millard, MPH[‡]

*Office of Population Research, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, USA; [†]Maurer School of Law, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, USA; [‡]School of Public Health-Bloomington, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, USA

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. Women undergoing fertility treatment are likely to report negative changes in sexual function. With the rapid increase in the number of women pursuing in vitro fertilization (IVF), there is a need to better understand how IVF impacts a woman's sexual experiences and quality of life.

Aims. This study has three purposes: (i) test the psychometric properties of the Sexual Functioning Questionnaire (SFQ) in a sample of U.S. women undergoing IVF; (ii) compare sexual function of women undergoing IVF with a nonclinical sample of U.S. women; and (iii) identify the aspects of sexual function most related to fertility quality of life (FertiQoL).

Method. A total of 136 women who had recently undergone or who were currently undergoing IVF completed a web-based, cross-sectional survey about sexual experiences and quality of life.

Main Outcome Measures. Data were collected on infertility diagnosis, length of infertility, number of IVF cycles, pregnancy, and birth outcomes. Six domains of sexual function as well as the medical impact of IVF were assessed using the SFQ. A validated instrument was used to measure FertiQoL.

Results. Reliability analyses for the SFQ indicate sufficiently strong fit (Cronbach's alpha = 0.79 to 0.89). Compared with a nonclinical sample, women undergoing IVF scored significantly lower in sexual interest, desire, orgasm, satisfaction, sexual activity, and overall sexual function ($P < 0.05$). A stepwise linear regression indicated that sexual problems predicted FertiQoL scores (Beta = 4.61, $P < 0.01$). The most common sexual problems included lack of sexual interest or desire (30%), difficulty with orgasm (15%), vaginal dryness (14%), and vaginal tightness (13%).

Conclusions. Women undergoing IVF may be at particular risk for sexual problems. Sexual function issues may markedly impact overall quality of life during fertility treatment and should be addressed as an important component of comprehensive care. **Smith NK, Madeira J, and Millard HR. Sexual function and fertility quality of life in women using in vitro fertilization. J Sex Med 2015;12:985–993.**

Key Words. In Vitro Fertilization; Sexual Function; Sexual Problems; Fertility Quality of Life

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Introduction

Approximately 11% of American women of reproductive age will experience an inability to conceive or difficulties in carrying a pregnancy to term [1]. For those with adequate insurance coverage and monetary and social resources, an infertility diagnosis may result in a couple pursuing the use of assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) such as in vitro fertilization (IVF) to achieve parenthood.

Since its introduction to the United States in 1981, the demand and options available for ART have grown, with use doubling in the past decade [2]. In 2011, over 163,000 ART cycles were performed and 61,610 infants were born as a result of this technology [3]. Today, 1 out of every 100 children born in the United States was conceived through ART [3]. As the use of these technologies increases, it is essential to gain a better understanding of the health and behavioral outcomes associated with infertility treatment for women and their partners.

Qualitative findings by Glover et al. suggest that couples often rush into the decision to pursue fertility care and make treatment decisions without fully comprehending the vast array of possible consequences [4]. Infertility can challenge an intimate relationship in complex ways; sexual self-esteem may be deflated, paired with a perceived failure to fulfill traditional gender roles [5,6] or external pressures to conceive [7]. Strictly regulated fertility treatments that prohibit spontaneous sexual encounters [5,6] may also contribute to the emergence of sexual functioning issues such as erectile difficulties [8,9] or decreases in sexual desire or arousability [10–12]. Furthermore, individuals' attachment styles and personality traits [13] as well as levels of dependency and self-criticism [12] can also influence how couples cope with and attend to their relational needs during IVF and other fertility-related procedures. To date, research has identified an adverse relationship between infertility and sexual function [8,10,14,15], desire for sex [11], sexual concerns [12], sexual satisfaction [5,16], and relationship satisfaction [4,13,17]. Men and women struggling with infertility often report a reduction in the frequency of intimate encounters with their partners [8] and describe sex as “mechanical and forced,” limited by regimens that allow sex only during certain days of the cycle [5]. For many, sexual activity becomes strongly motivated by the need to conceive rather than by a desire to give or receive pleasure [15]. Conversely, infertility may bring couples closer together. Oddens et al. found that for almost half (44%) of couples, traversing infertility treatment strengthened their relationship [9]. As more individuals choose from the growing array of ART options to form their families, there is a need to better understand the relational and sexual outcomes associated with these fertility treatments so that providers can support couples in maintaining a healthy intimate relationship both during and after treatment.

Sexual Functioning Questionnaire

The Sexual Functioning Questionnaire (SFQ) is a standardized sex-specific instrument that measures nine aspects of sexual functioning. The scale assesses how a medical condition or treatment impacts individuals and their sexual partners [18,19]. It was originally tested for reliability and validity with cancer patients and a control group without a medical condition; the scale was effective in both samples [20]. A recent study employing the SFQ with infertile couples in a Middle Eastern country found that approximately 48% of women experienced issues with sexual pain, while over 70% reported difficulties with vaginal lubrication and a large majority (80%) of women experienced unsatisfactory sexual arousal [10]. To our knowledge, the SFQ has never been validated for women undergoing IVF, nor has it been used with women receiving infertility care in the United States. As IVF dictates the timing of sexual encounters and may interfere with other aspects of the intimate relationship, assessing sexual characteristics with the SFQ could prove beneficial in furthering our understanding of the association between fertility treatment and sexual function.

Fertility Quality of Life

Relationship satisfaction and sexual health contribute to an individual's overall quality of life [21]. Couples dealing with infertility often experience fertility-related quality of life issues [22]. The Fertility Quality of Life (FertiQoL) measure is a 36-item scale that was developed as an international tool to assess specific infertility and treatment-related quality of life indicators for men and women receiving fertility care [23]. It has been validated in a multinational sample and translated into 20 languages. Previous research has found that both anxiety and depression are negatively correlated to overall FertiQoL scores for individuals undergoing fertility treatment [22]. The FertiQoL includes a subscale measuring relationship components (including some sexuality-related items); however, a more detailed assessment of the association between sexual function and fertility quality of life has yet to be undertaken.

Aim

The increase in the use of ART, particularly IVF, underscores the need to better understand how infertility and subsequent treatment are related to women's sexual experiences and quality of life. To that aim, this article seeks to fill three gaps: (i) test

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