

Pain Experienced During Vaginal and Anal Intercourse with Other-Sex Partners: Findings from a Nationally Representative Probability Study in the United States

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DOI: 10.1111/jsm.12841

ABSTRACT

Introduction. Recent U.S. nationally representative data indicate that about 30% of women and 5% of men reported pain occurring during their most recent sexual event; however, little is known about the severity, duration, or context of such pain, or its prevalence during vaginal vs. anal intercourse.

Aims. To document the prevalence and characteristics of pain during vaginal and anal intercourse among U.S. women and men (ages 18+) at their most recent other-sex sexual event, including the self-reported severity, duration, and location of their pain; how participants addressed their pain; and partner communication related to the pain.

Methods. Data from a subsample of 1,738 women and men in the 2012 National Survey of Sexual Health Behavior, a nationally representative probability survey of Americans ages 18+ collected via the Internet, were analyzed.

Main Outcome Measures. Participants responded to items about their background characteristics; whether they had vaginal or anal intercourse during their most recent sexual experience; the severity, duration, and location of any pain experienced during said sexual event; and whether they responded to or communicated about the pain.

Results. About 30% of women and 7% of men reported pain during vaginal intercourse events, and most of the reports of pain were mild and of short duration. About 72% of women and 15% of men reported pain during anal intercourse events, with more of these events including moderate or severe pain (for the women) and of mixed duration. Large proportions of Americans do not tell their partner when sex hurts.

Conclusion. Pain is a relatively common, and often not discussed, aspect of both vaginal and anal intercourse events occurring between women and men. Individual and clinical implications are discussed. **Herbenick D, Schick V, Sanders SA, Reece M, and Fortenberry JD. Pain experienced during vaginal and anal intercourse with other-sex partners: Findings from a nationally representative probability study in the United States. J Sex Med 2015;12:1040–1051.**

Key Words. Painful Intercourse; Dyspareunia; Sexual Function; Anodyspareunia

Introduction

Data from the 2009 National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior indicate that about 5% of men and about 30% of women in the United States report some degree of pain during their most recent sexual experience [1]. Women's experiences

of genital pain during sexual activities appear to be a common outcome of multiple etiologic pathways related to hormonal status (e.g., menopause, lactation), vulvar dermatoses (e.g., lichen sclerosus), gynecological health (e.g., endometriosis), infections (e.g., bacterial vaginosis or candidiasis), medications (e.g., reduced vaginal lubrication from

hormonal contraception), and mechanical issues (e.g., tight genital fit between partners, vaginal penetration despite insufficient vaginal lubrication, etc), or may have unclear origins, perhaps resulting in a diagnosis of vulvodynia [2–13]. Vulvodynia, dyspareunia, and other types of genital pain can create substantial personal distress to patients and relationship partners and have been linked with lower scores on measures of sexual satisfaction [2–13].

Men's experience of genital pain during sexual activities is less common [1]. Most studies on men's experiences of pain during sex focus on anorectal pain during penile–anal intercourse between men (anodyspareunia), phimosis, or painful ejaculation (including as a side effect of medications or related to chronic pelvic pain syndrome/chronic prostatitis), though penoscrotodynia is increasingly being described and investigated [14–16]. Despite some parallels, no single causal mechanism appears to explain the variety of conditions in both men and women. Also, in spite of the increased prevalence of anal intercourse among Americans [17], little is known about pain during anal intercourse, particularly among women and men who have anal intercourse with one another [14,18,19].

Given the large number of clinical studies of genital pain (which are valuable and necessary for improving understanding of patient outcomes and care), less is perhaps known about the population distribution of the full range of genital pain, about the characteristics of pain, and about the sexual function and interpersonal characteristics associated with these diverse experiences of pain. Better understanding of the prevalence and characteristics of genital pain could guide new public health education efforts for both patients and clinicians.

Aims

The purpose of this study (a subset of the 2012 National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior) was to document the prevalence and characteristics of pain during vaginal and anal intercourse among women and men ages 18 and older in the United States, including the self-reported severity, duration, and location of their pain, how participants addressed their pain, and partner communication related to the pain.

Methods

The 2012 NSSHB is a population-based cross-sectional survey of adult women and men in the

United States. Data were collected during October and November 2012, via the KnowledgePanel of GfK Research (GfK) (Menlo Park, California). Research panels accessed through GfK are based on a national probability sample established using both random digit dialing and an address-based sampling (ABS) frame. ABS involves the probability sampling of a frame of residential addresses in the United States derived from the U.S. Postal Service's Delivery Sequence File, a system containing detailed information on every mail deliverable address in the United States. Collectively, the sampling frame from which participants are recruited covers approximately 98% of all U.S. households. Randomly selected addresses are recruited to the research panel through a series of mailings and subsequently by telephone follow-ups to nonresponders when possible. To further correct the sources of sampling and nonsampling error, study samples are corrected with a poststratification adjustment using demographic distributions from the most recent data available from the Current Population Survey, the monthly population survey conducted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census considered to be the standard for measuring demographic and other trends in the United States. These adjustments result in a panel base weight that was employed in a probability proportional to size selection method for establishing the samples for this study.

Once the sample frame was established, all individuals within that frame received a recruitment message from GfK that provided a brief description of the NSSHB and invited them to participate. A total of 6,175 were included in the initial sampling frame, with 61.5% ($n = 4,020$) viewing the informed consent. Of those viewing the informed consent, 81.7% ($n = 3,285$) consented to participate, with a total of 3,138 of those individuals (95.5%) completing the survey (50.8% of the initial sampling frame). Of these participants, 1,559 were women and 1,510 were men. This particular analysis was restricted to the 864 women and 874 men who reported that their most recent sexual experience with a partner included vaginal and/or anal intercourse with an other-sex partner.

The survey was administered in either English or Spanish. Data were collected by GfK via the Internet; participants in a given KnowledgePanel were provided with access to the Internet and hardware if needed. Multiple researchers have used GfK's KnowledgePanel for multiple health-related studies, substantiating the validity of such methods for obtaining data from nationally

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