

Lifetime Lubricant Use among a Nationally Representative Sample of Lesbian- and Bisexual-Identified Women in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. The diversity in self-identified lesbian and bisexual women's sexual interactions necessitates better understanding of how and when they integrate personal lubricant into different experiences. However, little is known about lesbian and bisexual women's lifetime lubricant use, particularly at the population level.

Aims. The aim of this study was to examine the prevalence and characteristics of lubricant use among adult lesbian and bisexual women in the United States.

Methods. Data were drawn from a subset of lesbian and bisexual participants who participated in the 2012 National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior, an online questionnaire administered to a nationally representative probability sample of U.S. adults ages 18 and older.

Main Outcome Measures. We examined socio-demographic characteristics, recent and lifetime lubricant use, lubricant use in associated with specific sexual behaviors and condom use, frequency of use, motivations for use, as well as perception of lubricant when used.

Results. A majority of lesbian- (60.1%) and bisexual-identified (77.1%) women reported ever using lubricant; 25.7% of lesbian women and 32.7% of bisexual women used it in the last 30 days. Across most age groups, lubricant was commonly used during partnered sexual play, partnered sexual intercourse, or when a vibrator/dildo was used. Lesbian and bisexual women reported using lubricants to increase arousal/sexual pleasure/desire, to make sex more fun, or to increase physical comfort during sex.

Conclusions. Lubricant use is identified as a part of lesbian and bisexual women's sexual experience across the life span, as a part of both solo and partnered experiences. As part of evolving sexual health assessments, clinicians and health educators may find value in integrating lubricant-focused conversation with their lesbian and bisexual patients and clients, particularly. **Hensel DJ, Schick V, Herbenick D, Dodge B, Reece M, Sanders SA, and Fortenberry JD. Lifetime lubricant use among a nationally representative sample of lesbian- and bisexual-identified women in the United States. J Sex Med 2015;12:1257–1266.**

Key Words. Lesbian Women; Bisexual Women; Lubricant; Sexual Behavior; Nationally Representative Sample

Introduction

Recent literature illuminates considerable diversity in the types of solo and partnered, penetrative and non-penetrative, manual-genital, oral-genital, and toy-focused sexual behaviors self-

identified lesbian and bisexual women integrate into their sexual repertoire [1–8]. This behavior variety presents unique sexual health challenges among lesbian and bisexual women [9], as a woman's use, care, and treatment of her vagina and genital area have important implications for her

sexual function, sexual pleasure and fertility, as well as her vulnerability to a variety of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including human immunodeficiency virus [10–12]. Thus, understanding how, when, and for what reasons lesbian and bisexual women have used personal lubricants during their sexual interactions is important for supporting their sexual health.

Scientific literature describing women's lubricant use is growing. Nationally representative surveys of U.S. adults have shown that a majority (62.0% to 65.5%) of women aged 18 to 59 years have ever used a lubricant for solo and/or partnered activities, with a quarter of the same age group doing so in the last month [13,14], and a third doing so during their most recent sexual encounter, both with and without condom use [15–17]. Nationally representative samples of lesbian and bisexual women suggest similarly high levels of lifetime lubricant use [18], with 25% of lesbian-identified women and 40% of bisexual-identified women reporting lubricant use in the past month [3].

Women use lubricants for a number of reasons [14], such as increasing physical comfort, increasing sexual pleasure and satisfaction during vaginal or anal penetration [16], or to increase vaginal wetness and orgasmic response during sex [17,19]. Lubricant may also be recommended to women for the reduction of pain and the risk of vaginal or anal tearing, as well as the amelioration of vaginal dryness [19–21]. Moreover, various public health initiatives recommend the addition of water- or silicone-based lubricant to male condom-protected sex acts as a means of reducing male condom failure, such as breakage [22].

Although these studies provide general evidence as to the widespread use and factors associated with women's lubricant use, little is known about the frequency and context of *self-identified lesbian and bisexual* women's lubricant use over the life span, their perceptions of lubricants, or their motivations for using lubricants. One reason for this paucity can be linked to the general challenges of recruiting lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) individuals. The absence of a sampling frame for LGBT individuals often compels researchers interested in these groups to rely upon more feasible non-probability-based recruitment methods, such as convenience sampling [23]. The bias introduced in these methods can make it difficult to reliably generalize findings about beyond the specific individuals in a given sample. Therefore, an

important contribution of the current study is our use of a probability sampling approach, making these results nationally representative of self-identified lesbian and bisexual women's lubricant use patterns.

A second factor in this limited understanding is associated with inconsistency in the manner in which studies define sexual orientation and/or sexual identity. Specifically, a large number of previous studies have collapsed "lesbians" and "bisexual" women into one monolithic category designated as "women who have sex with women." [24] This false assumption of similarity between these two groups [25] both masks differences in lesbian and bisexual women's unique preferences and choices important to understanding their sexual health, and obscures elements of their sexual behavior vital to the success of public health and/or education intervention and research [24]. Thus, an additional strength of the current study is our ability to assess lubricant use patterns and motivations separately among lesbian and bisexual women.

This more refined understanding could enhance the design of lesbian- or bisexual women-tailored STI prevention programs. For example, although having female-only vs. both male and female sexual partners creates different types of STI risk between lesbian and bisexual women [26], lubricant use could be positioned in both groups to reduce any vaginal trauma-associated STI exposure (e.g., tearing or abrasions) that might occur during common sexual activities. Such use could be particularly important among lesbian women, who can falsely believe STIs are less likely to be transmitted between women [8]. Moreover, detailed data could assist clinicians and other health professionals in their efforts to address lesbian and bisexual patients' lubricant-related questions or concerns [17].

Moreover, additional data could assist health professionals in their efforts to address lesbian and bisexual patients' lubricant-related questions or lubricant-related concerns across different life stages [17]. For example, lubricant use could be important to facilitating comfort and pleasure during younger lesbian and bisexual women's participation in more exploratory-type sexual behaviors or during midlife as some lesbian and bisexual women initiate new sexual relationships. Likewise, lubricant could be an important adjunct among those who experience pain during solo or partnered sex, or for those who want to increase sexual pleasure during solo sex.

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