

Who is the 40-Year-Old Virgin and Where Did He/She Come From? Data from the National Survey of Family Growth

Michael L. Eisenberg, MD,* Alan W. Shindel, MD,* James F. Smith, MD, MS,* Tom F. Lue, MD,* and Thomas J. Walsh, MD, MS*†

*The Department of Urology, University of California, San Francisco, CA, USA; †The Department of Urology, University of Washington School of Medicine, Seattle, WA, USA

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. Little is known about young and middle aged adults who have never engaged in sexual intercourse. Individuals who have not engaged in sexual activity may theoretically have diminished overall quality of life, as recent evidence suggests that sexual activity may be related to overall health status in adults.

Aim. We sought to identify factors related to sexual abstinence in young and middle-aged adults.

Methods. We analyzed data from the male and female sample of the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth to examine sexual abstinence among unmarried participants aged 25–45 (men: N = 2,469; women: N = 5,120).

Main Outcome Measures. Multivariable logistic regression modeling was used to test for independent associations between demographic, medical, and anthropometric variables and abstinence while adjusting for confounding and mediating variables.

Results. A total of 122 (13.9%) men aged 25–45 reported never having had sex, representing approximately 1.1 million American men in this age cohort. Among female participants, a total of 104 (8.9%) women aged 25–45 reported never having sex, representing approximately 800,000 American women in this age cohort. Both men and women who reported that they attend religious services one or more times per week were more likely to be sexually abstinent, independent of their specific religious beliefs. Virgin status was also significantly associated with drinking alcohol within the past year. While a college degree in women predicted virginity, education was not associated with virginity in men. Men showed lower rates of sexual abstinence if they reported having spent time in prison or serving in the military.

Conclusions. Amongst young adults, sexual abstinence does not appear to be mediated by health status, anthropometric measures, or age. Attending religious services and avoidance of alcohol consumption are associated with virginity in adults. Other factors associated with abstinence differ between genders and merit further study.

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Key Words. Sexual Abstinence; Adult; Socioeconomic Factors; United States; Sexual Behavior

Introduction

Sexual intercourse is important for species propagation; in humans, sex is also important for physical pleasure and emotional intimacy [1]. Sexuality has been linked to happiness and health in men and women from all parts of the world [2,3]. Diminution in frequency of intercourse can be a marker for depression, and those with increasing health ailments tend to engage in less inter-

course [3–5]. Whether declines in intercourse frequency in these populations are cause or effect of comorbid conditions is unclear.

In the United States, studies of sexual abstinence have focused primarily on adolescents in an attempt to better understand the risk factors for unintended pregnancy and/or transmission of sexually transmitted diseases [6–11]. Socioeconomic status and demographic factors, such as race or parental education, have been linked to “high-risk” sexual

behavior [6,9,12]. While adolescent abstinence has been extensively researched, much less is known about factors mediating sexual abstinence in adults. Factors influencing abstinence cannot simply be applied across age strata [13]. For instance, heavy alcohol consumption is associated with sexual dysfunction in older adults [2,14,15], but increases the likelihood of multiple sexual encounters in younger people [6,7].

Prior investigations have linked the timing of first *heterosexual* sexual encounter to impaired psychological and physical health later in life in those who have either early or late sexual debut [16–18]. Given the possibility for health consequences later in life and the inability to draw conclusions from prior investigations, we sought to characterize adult male and female virgins in the United States to determine which (if any) socioeconomic, general health, or anthropomorphic factors predicted *heterosexual* virginal status.

Materials and Methods

Study Population

We analyzed data from male sample of the 2002 (Cycle 6) National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG). Trained staff conducted interviews in selected families' homes between March 2002 and February 2003. In all, 4,928 men and 7,643 women representing the population of the United States living in households were surveyed. The NSFG is a multistage probability sample designed to represent the household population of U.S. women and men aged 15–45. Within in each household, one member within the required age range was randomly selected for recruitment. Certain groups, including black and Hispanic adults, were sampled at higher rates to achieve adequate samples for generating nationally representative point estimates and power to examine differences between racial and ethnic groups. In order to maintain privacy, only a single member of a given household was asked to participate. In addition, several of the more sensitive questions administered including sexual practices and drug use were asked via computer and headphones to give the respondent additional privacy. All subjects provided written consent for participation. The survey is available in both English and Spanish. The overall response rate for the survey was 79% [19]. We limited our analysis to single participants 25 years of age or older. Institutional Review Board review is not required for

secondary data analysis of a de-identified national data set.

Description of Variables

Outcome

Virgin status among surveyed men was determined by asking: "Have you ever had sexual intercourse with a female (sometimes this is called making love, having sex, or going all the way)?" For women, surveyors asked "At any time in your life, have you ever had sexual intercourse with a man, that is, made love, had sex, or gone all the way?" Heterosexual virginity was coded as a dichotomous variable (Yes/No). Sexual orientation was also assessed in the survey (heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, other). While accuracy of responses could not be assessed, consistency of virginity responses were checked to ensure no self proclaimed virgins had children or were ever married. Moreover, respondents who had been married or had biological children were categorized as not virgins. Participants who did not answer the question and virginity status could not be assessed were excluded from all subsequent analyses.

Exposure

Demographic, socioeconomic, behavioral, and geographic characteristics were analyzed to assess associations with virginity. All potential mediating and confounding variables were selected a priori. Variables were selected based on items in the literature found to be associated with sexual behavior in adolescents and adults. Variables analyzed included age (continuous); self reported health status (excellent, very good, good, fair, poor); self reported race/ethnicity (white, black, Hispanic, Asian, other); education level (dichotomous—less than college degree/college degree or above); income level (categorical variable in \$25,000 intervals), sexual orientation (homosexual—yes/no); area of residence (dichotomous—Metropolitan Statistical Area [MSA]/non-MSA); religious affiliation (catholic, protestant, none, other); religious attendance (dichotomous—greater than or less than weekly attendance at place of worship); ever employed (dichotomous—yes/no); self reported height and weight; alcohol consumption in past year (dichotomous—yes/no); and marijuana use in past year (dichotomous—yes/no). For male participants, military status (dichotomous—ever served yes/no) and incarceration record (dichotomous—ever spent time in jail yes/no) were recorded.

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