

Original research article

“And Isn’t that the point?”: pleasure and contraceptive decisions[☆]

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Abstract

Objective: Previous survey research indicates that women and men experience reduced sexual pleasure when using condoms, especially compared to nonbarrier family planning methods. This study seeks to explore those experiences of reduced pleasure in-depth and how they affect contraceptive method decisions and use.

Study Design: In-depth interviews with 30 men and 30 women between the ages of 18 and 36 years in the United States about their contraceptive decisions and use were analyzed.

Results: Both men and women complained about the way that condoms interfered with their sexual pleasure. Several women (and no men) complained that condoms actually hurt them, and the majority of couples had at least one member who reported disliking condoms. For hormonal methods and intrauterine devices, general side effects were usually one of the most important reasons that women continued or discontinued methods, but few sexual side effects were reported.

Conclusions: Interfering with sexual pleasure appears to be the most important reason that both men and women do not use condoms, and public health practitioners should recognize the limitations of condoms as a contraceptive technology. Despite problems with general side effects, most women (and men) prefer hormonal methods to condoms.

Implications: This study provides in-depth descriptions showing that young adult men *and* women in the United States use condoms less because condoms interfere with their sexual pleasure. Although women often say they experience general negative side effects from hormonal birth control, they usually perceive few sexual side effects from hormonal birth control. Since young heterosexual adults usually perceive themselves to be at much greater risk for pregnancy than sexually transmitted infections, they mostly perceive hormonal birth control to be a greatly superior contraceptive option compared to condoms.

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1. Introduction

In March 2013, the Gates Foundation released a well-publicized call for grant applications to make “better condoms” [1]. The call clearly emphasized the need to design and manufacture condoms which users would find more pleasurable and stated that, “The primary drawback [of condoms] from the male perspective is that condoms decrease pleasure as compared to no condom, creating a trade-off that many men find unacceptable.” Unfortunately, would-be designers and inventors competing for the

Foundation’s \$100,000 will find few academic articles about what heterosexual men find so displeasing about condoms. However, they may be surprised to find from this developing body of research that both men *and* women feel that condoms reduce their sexual pleasure, so their task may be harder than the Foundation’s call imagines.

Although the Gates Foundation and other nonacademics seem to take for granted that the physical awkwardness of condoms is perhaps the leading factor in their nonuse and a fairly large body of literature has studied the preference for anal sex without condoms among men who have sex with men (MSMs) [2,3], much less academic research has examined the role that sexual pleasure plays in the overall contraceptive decisions and use for heterosexual men and even less for women. The influence of pleasure on contraceptive decision making for heterosexuals is presumably more complex than for MSMs, since heterosexuals

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frequently use contraception for both pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection (STI) prevention. If concerns about pregnancy vastly outweigh concerns about STIs, then heterosexuals' decisions must be understood from a context where condoms and hormonal birth control methods may appear to be competing—and not necessarily complementary—options (the term “hormonal birth control” will be used here to refer to all hormonal birth control methods, as well as nonhormonal intrauterine devices [IUDs]). However, most research on the relationship between pleasure and contraceptive decisions and use for heterosexuals has focused primarily on condoms, and disproportionately on men.

Graham [4] provides an excellent review of the literature on condoms and sexual pleasure, and some of the relevant highlights are briefly summarized here. Previous research with men indicates that condoms are associated with difficulty achieving orgasm [5] and difficulty maintaining penile erections [6]. Research with men and women has found that both sexes complain that condoms cause loss of sensation and that they dislike the smell of condoms [7]. One small study found that women and men both often disliked condoms and that their dislike was correlated with less use, with men's dislike stronger than women's and more strongly correlated with less use [8]. Higgins and Hirsch [10] conducted one of the very few in-depth studies of the effect of pleasure on contraceptive decision making, interviewing 36 men and women in Atlanta, GA; in that study, more women than men objected to the feel of condoms. Their findings also indicate that some people eroticize pregnancy risk taking with partners; that is, they find the idea of sexual risk and/or the potential for pregnancy with a particular partner to be sexy, while others de-eroticize risk, and say they are unable to be comfortable and enjoy sex if they feel they are at risk for pregnancy or disease. Graham [4] notes that more in-depth data are still needed to help us better understand how women's dislike of condoms may lead to their nonuse, and what aspects of pleasure men and women perceive as most negatively affected by condoms. One of the goals of the present study is to help fill some of this gap in the literature.

Whereas the effects of condoms on sexual pleasure can be immediate and obvious, especially for men, the effects of hormonal birth control on pleasure are less obvious, since the signs of women's arousal are much less conspicuous than men's. Studies of the effects of hormonal contraception on women's sexual desire and function have usually found little effect or mixed effects [11–14]. The most recent review [15] of oral contraceptives concluded that, on average, more women appear to experience increased libido than decreased libido from oral contraceptives; however, almost all of these studies only follow women for 1 year, even though women may use hormonal birth control for years. Another recent review concluded simply that, “The sexual side effects of hormonal contraceptives are not well studied, particularly with regard to impact on libido” [16].

Although some studies have documented negative sexual side effects from hormonal birth control [17], and a current popular book, *Sweetening the Pill* [18], has recently argued that hormonal birth control has long-term damaging effects on women's libidos, the uncertainty about and subtlety of these effects is crucial for understanding the way that pleasure affects the contraceptive decisions of heterosexual couples. Even if, hypothetically, the long-term overall side effects of hormonal birth control on sexual pleasure are very problematic, the subtlety of those effects may prevent users from detecting them and thus have little influence on their contraceptive decisions.

Higgins and Hirsch [10] have argued that a broad conceptualization of the experience of “pleasure” is necessary for understanding the way that it affects contraceptive decisions and use. Hormonal birth control use may have effects on sexual situations, but women use it even when they are not having sex. Rather than narrowly focusing on women's direct experiences of pleasure during sex while using hormonal birth control—which they use all the time, not just when having sex—the current study conceptualizes the experiences of “pleasure” (sexual and nonsexual) more broadly. Previous research indicates that the negative experience of side effects from hormonal birth control may be interwoven between overall mood and sexual desire [17]. Despite the conclusion of at least one study that there are few real negative side effects of any sort associated with oral contraceptive pills [19], research on the impact of general side effects on the discontinuation of hormonal contraceptives using nationally representative samples in the United States has typically concluded that perceived positive or negative side effects are one of the most important factors in determining women's continued method use [20–24]. However, few studies have explored U.S. women's general experiences of hormonal contraceptive side effects and contraceptive dis/continuation with in-depth data [25–27] (for Britain, see Cheung and Free [28]). Given the importance of general side effects on continued method use, further exploration of the way that general side effects and sexual side effects interweave to create an overall experience of “pleasure” with hormonal contraceptive use seems warranted and is another goal of the present study.

However, the most important point when analyzing the way that pleasure affects the contraceptive decisions of heterosexuals is to understand the way that men and women compare condoms and hormonal birth control. Using a small Internet convenience sample, one study [29] found that women who only used condoms were six times as likely to report that their contraceptive method decreased their sexual pleasure as women who only used hormonal birth control. A large representative survey in Germany [30] found that women who used oral contraceptives, IUDs and sterilization generally experienced a positive impact on their sex lives, while women who used condoms generally experienced a negative effect. These studies have the advantage of following women through their experiences

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