

SEXUAL DESIRE

## Declining Sexual Activity and Desire in Men—Findings From Representative German Surveys, 2005 and 2016



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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Surveys have indicated an increase of sexual activity in aging men; recently, however, a decrease of sexual activity has been reported in young men.

**Aim:** To assess (i) sexual activity and desire and their determinants across the age range in a population-based male sample and (ii) their changes over 11 years.

**Methods:** A representative survey of men (N = 1,095) 18 to 93 years old from 2016 was compared with a survey from 2005 (N = 1,106 men) with the same age range. Samples were drawn from the German population at random using standardized sampling procedures. Questions were filled out by participants in the presence of a trained interviewer. Sexual activity was compared using logistic regression with the factors survey (2005 vs 2016), living with a partner (yes vs no), and age. Frequency of sexual desire was compared using analysis of covariance with the factors survey (2005 vs 2016), living with a partner (yes vs no), and the covariate age.

**Outcomes:** Sexual activity was assessed as having been intimate with someone in the past year; frequency of sexual desire was evaluated within the past 4 weeks.

**Results:** The great majority of men cohabiting with a partner in 2016 was sexually active and indicated sexual desire until 70 years of age; half did so at an older age. Across the age range, men living without a partner reported considerably less sexual activity and desire. Compared with 2005, fewer men reported living with a partner. The overall proportion of men reporting sexual activity decreased from 81% to 73% in 2016 and absent sexual desire increased from 8% to 13%.

**Clinical Translation:** The findings highlight the relevance of living with a partner for sexual activity and desire. We advocate using a measure of sexual activity that encompasses many variants of intimate behavior.

**Strengths and Limitations:** Large and methodologically comparable population-based samples were compared. However, interpretations are limited by the absence of longitudinal data. We did not assess the effect of having a partner living elsewhere.

**Conclusion:** Sexual activity and desire decreased, especially in the young and middle-age groups. The decrease of men living with a partner contributed to this decreased sexual activity and desire. There was a generation effect, with younger and middle-age men living without a partner becoming less sexually active and experiencing less desire compared with the previous survey. The findings unveil changes in sexual activity and desire in a short time span. **Beutel ME, Burghardt J, Tibubos AN, et al. Declining Sexual Activity and Desire in Men—Findings From Representative German Surveys, 2005 and 2016. J Sex Med 2018;15:750–756.**

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**Key Words:** Sexual Desire; Sexual Activity; Partnership; Representative Sample

### INTRODUCTION

Sexuality is an important part of men's quality of life. Sexual dysfunctions can compromise well-being, intimate relationships, and health.<sup>1</sup> Absent sexual behavior is increasingly construed as a biological rather than an interpersonal issue.<sup>2</sup> Despite an age-related increase of erectile dysfunction,<sup>3</sup> most aging men retain an interest in sexuality. Further, in a representative German sample of men 18 to 92 years old (N = 1,299) in 1994,<sup>4</sup> living

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with a partner was the crucial variable for sexual activity. In men older than 60 years, more than 60% cohabited with a partner, but only 17% who did not have a partner reported being sexually active, demonstrating the relevance of interpersonal factors for sexual activity. However, in the following survey in 2005, we found strong increases of sexual activity in older men living with a partner and in men living without a partner across the entire age range.<sup>5</sup> Most men maintained some degree of sexual desire into their 70s and beyond. Similarly, after combining data from 2 US population-based studies with 3,032 adults (25–74 years) from a midlife cohort (Midlife in the United States [MIDUS], conducted in 1995 and 1996) and 3,005 adults (57–85 years) from a later-life cohort (National Social Life, Health and Aging Project [NSHAP], conducted in 2005 and 2006), Lindau and Gavrilova<sup>6</sup> found that men 57 to 74 years old increased their sexual interest from 44.6% to 75.3% over the 2 decades.

In contrast, Twenge et al<sup>7</sup> reported a recent increase of sexual inactivity in young people based on a large representative study of American citizens collected from 1972 to 2014. The percentage of men 20 to 24 years old who had had no sexual partner since 18 years increased from 8% in the cohort born in the 1960s to 14% in the cohort born in the 1990s. This finding was seen as somewhat paradoxical because societal sexual rules had become more individualistic and permissive (eg, increase of same-sex sexual contacts, oral and anal sex)<sup>8,9</sup> and internet-based instant dating offers had become permanently available in recent years. However, postponement of teenage sexual experience, marriage, vocational responsibility, and moving out of their parents' home could have delayed sexual maturation of the so-called Millennials born in the 1990s.<sup>7,10</sup> Knowledge about sexual desire and activity over the lifespan should serve as an important reference in counseling, indicating, and evaluating treatments for sexual dysfunction along the life trajectory of men.<sup>11</sup> However, data on sexual desire and activity of men and their determinants have been scarce in the general population, especially from Europe.<sup>12</sup> Studies have usually focused on aging populations<sup>4,13</sup> and often have been performed in the United States.<sup>6</sup> Based on different cultural norms, findings cannot be generalized to Europe; for instance, in 2013 a survey found that 6% of Germans judged premarital sex to be unacceptable compared with 30% in the US sample.<sup>14</sup> It is not clear how the general trends of decreasing marriages and increasing numbers of men living alone<sup>15</sup> have affected sexual desire and activity.

Based on 2 large and representative community surveys using identical methods, this study addressed the following issues: (i) to determine sexual activity and frequency of sexual desire across the age range and (ii) to identify changes across the range of 11 years.

## METHODS

### Participants

Data were collected in 2 representative cross-sectional surveys of the German population in 2005 (August) and 2016 (mid-February through mid-March). 1,095 men 18 to 93 years old

participated in 2016 (1,106 in 2005; women are reported separately) in 2 representative quantitative surveys in Germany spanning a variety of different research questions. Data were collected by USUMA (Unabhängiger Service für Umfragen, Methoden und Analysen; an independent service for surveys, methods, and analyses) based on 210 sample points in eastern and western parts of Germany.<sup>16</sup> Trained interviewers surveyed participants in their homes (in person). Sampling followed Association of German Market Research Institutes guidelines to ensure the representativeness of the sample for the total German population.<sup>17</sup> Applying the random-route method, region (1st), household (2nd), and target persons per households (3rd) were randomly selected. In 2016 52.7% (vs 65% in 2005) of the sample were interviewed; this is well within the range of quotas of other representative community samples.<sup>16</sup>

The mean age of the 2 cohorts was 50 years (range = 18–93 years). From 2005 to 2016 education level increased significantly (high school graduate 17.1–23.5%), whereas unemployment did not show significant changes (9.0–6.8%; cf Table 1).

The study and procedure, including the consent procedure, were approved by the institutional ethics review board of the University of Leipzig. The trained interviewer delivered a detailed data privacy statement and informed all participants of the study's procedures, data collection, and de-identification of all personal data. In line with recommendations by the Federation of German Psychologists Associations, all participants provided verbal informed consent, which was noted by the interviewer before the survey started.<sup>18</sup> The present study represents only minor risks to participants, because no medical treatments, invasive diagnostics, or procedures causing psychological, spiritual, or social harm were applied.

### Measures

The 2 surveys used identical items and procedures. Participants answered questions regarding demographic information asked by the interviewer (face to face). This information included age ( $\geq 18$  years), sex, marital and employment status, education, and total household income. Cohabitation was coded when the participant selected the marital status of married, living together (alternatives were married, separated, divorced, widowed, or single) or endorsed the question, "Are you living together with your partner?" Participants answered questions regarding sexual behavior on their own, with the interviewer in the room. Sexual activity was assessed by the question, "People differ very much regarding their sexual practice and habits. Some are more, some are less active, and everyone has times in their lives when nothing happens with regard to sexuality. What about you? Were you intimate with someone in the past 12 months? Yes or no?" Frequency of sexual desire was assessed by the question, "How often have you felt sexual desire during the past 4 weeks?" ("never" = 0, "rarely" = 1, "occasionally" = 2, "frequently" = 3, "very frequently" = 4). Tables 2 and 3 present the number of missing values per variable. In all age groups, more than 90% of participants were willing to answer the questions.

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