

How lockdown changed our sex lives, according to new research

March 30 2021, by Liam Wignall and Mark McCormack



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Lockdown significantly affected our health (for [good](#) and bad), our work and [how we socialize](#). These consequences have been widely discussed, but far less attention has been given to the effect on our sex lives.

When [lockdown](#) came into force in the UK in March 2020, people from outside the same household were not allowed to meet indoors, and only

at set distances outdoors. This meant that sex between people who didn't live together was effectively criminalized.

In some ways, these restrictions [disproportionately affected](#) young adults, who are more likely than older adults to be exploring their sexuality and developing romantic relationships. But the impact of lockdown on people's sexual desires and sex lives and how this affected their sense of wellbeing was not known. We decided to find out.

For our study, we surveyed 565 people aged 18-32 in the UK at the end of peak lockdown restrictions in May 2020. People were recruited through a convenience sample using a survey recruitment site.

Respondents were asked if they engaged in a list of sexual activities both before lockdown and during lockdown. This included intercourse, solo masturbation, and watching pornography. They were also asked to rate their health and wellbeing.

The number of respondents who engaged in each of these activities during lockdown decreased compared with before lockdown. The biggest decrease was for sex with a partner, with just over a quarter of respondents stopping this activity during lockdown (25.5%).

For those participants who continued to engage in sexual activities, we also asked whether the frequency increased or decreased during the period. There were both increases and decreases. Regarding increases, just over a quarter (26%) of people masturbated more often on their own, 20% reported having more intercourse with their partner, and 20% reported watching more pornography on their own.

Yet the same three sexual activities also decreased in frequency for some participants, with a third of people having less sex with their partner, a quarter masturbating alone less, and around a fifth (22%) watching less pornography alone.

People were more likely to report increases in sexual activity if they were male, in a serious relationship, and if they weren't heterosexual.

We also investigated [sexual desire](#). Women reported lower sexual desire than men overall, with a [significant decrease](#) in sexual desire during lockdown compared with before lockdown. Women with a greater enjoyment of casual sex reported a greater perceived effect of lockdown on their wellbeing.

Our findings, which are [published](#) in the *Journal of Sex Research*, support other [reports](#) into the effects of lockdown restrictions. Lockdown measures have disproportionately affected some groups more than others. The increase in housework and stress for women may explain the decrease in sexual desire and the negative effect on wellbeing.

Moving out of lockdown

There are many [health benefits](#), both [physical](#) and [mental](#), to engaging in regular [sexual activity](#). Sex can be an important component of people's lives and their identity, particularly for sexual minorities.

There are other concerns about COVID-19 and sexuality. Most sexual health and reproductive services in the UK have been severely limited or closed. There is [evidence](#) that access to condoms and contraception was disrupted for [young adults](#) during social lockdown.

Some sexual health charities have been offering home testing kits of sexually transmitted infection screenings, but there will be people who do not or cannot use these services. Similarly, there is evidence that [birth rates have dropped](#) significantly over the year, which might lead to an associated large increase in births over the next 12 months once people see some stability returning to their lives.

As the UK follows the road map out of lockdown, it is important to consider how those whose [sex lives](#) have been restricted will respond to the extra freedom, including casual sex. It has been suggested that we could see a new "[roaring 20s](#)" as we return to a new sense of normality.

Government policy ignored sex during lockdown. It needs to actively support sexual [health](#) and wellbeing as we return to some kind of normality.

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Provided by The Conversation

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