

# Canadians are having more sex during the pandemic, unless they're living with their partners

August 30 2021, by Lori A. Brotto

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In March 2020 when the world went into lockdown due to the newly announced COVID-19 pandemic, the media quickly speculated that a

[baby boom would follow nine months later](#). After all, what else would people do with all of this extra time on their hands while isolated with a partner?

The media were wrong. In fact, the pandemic took an enormous toll on Canadians' sex lives.

I hold a Canada Research Chair in Women's Sexual Health, am a professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the University of British Columbia and lead [the provincial Women's Health Research Institute](#). I have been fascinated by the study of sexual desire for two decades.

Our team at UBC Sexual Health Research swiftly mobilized a pan-Canadian study of sexual desire and behavior at the start of the pandemic essentially asking the question: [What effect does pandemic-related stress, relationship status and living situation have on sexual desire and behavior?](#)

## Sex in a pandemic

We recruited 1,019 Canadian residents from every province and territory in Canada. Participant ages ranged from 19 to 81, with an average age of 30 years. While 70 percent of the sample identified as white, the remaining 30 percent were ethnically diverse. Just over half the sample identified as heterosexual, and seven percent had a non-binary gender identity. A total of 37 percent lived with their partner—this variable was very important for understanding the impacts of the pandemic on sex lives.

More pandemic-related stress in the early days of lockdown produced higher rates of sexual coercion for people living with a partner, but had no effect for people who did not live with their partners. This was not surprising, and mirrors findings from past pandemics that [stress can](#)

[trigger or exacerbate interpersonal sexual violence in a relationship](#). The long-term effects of these increased sexual violence rates will remain a major issue for our [health systems](#) to address, particularly as shelters and other outlets for safety were out of reach and people (mostly women) were isolated with their partners.

### **Increase in solo activity**

We also found that pandemic stress increased desire for solo sexual activity (masturbation) among people who lived with their partners. In direct contrast to the early media predictions about skyrocketing rates of sex between couples, our data found that pandemic stress actually drove up desire for sex with oneself, not with a partner.

We also tracked what happened over the course of the summer months in 2020, as public [health](#) orders loosened and people began to re-engage in social activities. As months drew on, sexual desire for a partner decreased—not increased. This occurred even though pandemic stress remained the same over 2020.

Sexual activity with a partner increased, but only among those who didn't live with their partners. If you lived with a partner, sexual activity decreased over the summer months and into the fall.

Almost none of our findings matched what the media were predicting but this is perhaps not surprising, considering that absence (or not living with a partner) makes the heart grow fonder. And for those living together, perhaps there was too much time together in a way that suffocated sexuality.

Throw on top of that homeschooling, concerns about finances, limited social gatherings and an outright ban on travel, it was not at all surprising that the pandemic had this degree of impact on the sex lives of

Canadians.



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### **Increase sexual education**

Our findings mirror those coming out of the [United States](#) and [Europe](#). However, in a study led by researchers at the Kinsey Institute, [a small proportion of Americans were found to be engaging in more diverse and experimental sexual activity](#), as well as more masturbation. It may be that solo sex was an outlet for managing pandemic [stress](#) and isolation since masturbation can be self-soothing.

How can these findings be used, beyond helping us understand what elicits and extinguishes sexual desire and behavior? Many experts predict [lasting psychosocial effects of the COVID-19 pandemic](#), and this might also spill into the realm of sexuality. At present, however, there are limited resources to support people who struggle with sexual response.

Perhaps this is an opportunity to increase training in health education and medical schools to ensure that providers know how to provide support to people struggling with sexual health. Given the known effects of [sexual dysfunction on mood, anxiety, stress, relationship satisfaction and other facets of health](#), we can use what we learn about sexuality during the [pandemic](#) to break down myths about sex, and begin to have authentic and candid conversations about sexuality.

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