

How did lockdown affect people's sex lives in Britain?

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Lockdown affected people's sex lives in a variety of ways, with young people and those not living with a partner reporting the greatest changes, according to researchers from UCL, the University of Glasgow and the

National Centre for Social Research (NatCen).

The peer-reviewed paper, which is the largest national study of sexual behaviors since the beginning of the pandemic, is published today in *BMJ Sexually Transmitted Infections*. It reports the findings from 6,654 people aged between 18 and 59 who took part in a Natsal-COVID web-panel survey undertaken by Ipsos MORI.

Data was collected between 29 July and 10 August 2020 and participants were asked a series of questions about their sexual behavior (including physical and virtual activities) during the first four months of lockdown.

Professor Cath Mercer (UCL Institute for Global Health), co-first author of the paper, explained: "During the first nationwide lockdown, many people in Britain were unable to have [physical contact](#) with anyone outside their household and we wanted to find out how this affected their sexual behavior.

"What we found was a very varied picture depending on people's circumstances at the start of lockdown: for some people, their sex lives improved, for some it stayed the same, while for many it got worse. Although many adults, especially if they were living with a partner, continued to be sexually active and reported little change, for those who didn't live with a partner, COVID-19 restrictions were particularly detrimental."

Altogether, 63 percent of adults reported having physical sex with someone after lockdown started, and of those people, three quarters (76 percent) said they were in cohabiting relationships. When participants were asked how often they engaged in sexual activities, just over half (57 percent) of those sexually experienced (defined as those who reported ever having partnered sex) said there was no change in the number of times they had sex with a partner compared to the three

months before lockdown.

However, sexually experienced [young people](#) aged 18-24 were more likely to report a change in their sexual frequency—around 60 percent reported this—and of these, two-thirds (66 percent) perceived this to be a decline. A similar pattern for young people was seen in how they perceived changes in their sexual satisfaction.

Soazig Clifton (UCL Institute for Global Health and NatCen), Academic Director and joint co-first author, added: "Although there were some young people who felt their sex lives had improved, young people were more likely to report having sex less often and being less satisfied with their sex lives than they had been before lockdown started.

"This is likely to be at least, in part, because young people are less likely to be living with partners and were unable to meet sexual partners when restrictions were in place. Time will tell whether these changes in sexual behavior during the first lockdown translate into long-term shifts in behavior, or whether there is a 'rebound' effect with people making up for lost time."

Participants were also asked about whether they engaged in virtual [sexual activities](#) during the first lockdown. More than half (53 percent) reported a virtual sexual activity such as sexting or watching pornography compared to 84 percent who reported some form of physical sexual activity with a partner or by themselves. The proportion of people reporting virtual activities since [lockdown](#) was largely driven by watching pornography, reported by 65 percent of men and 21 percent of women.

Professor Kirstin Mitchell (University of Glasgow), joint senior author, added: "Physical touch is a fundamental human need and crucial in developing intimacy. Virtual ways of being sexual can feel less satisfying

because they don't allow that. We found the reduction in opportunity to give and receive intimate touch was not experienced equally across the population."

The authors note a key strength of the study was that it was designed to be broadly representative of the British population but say there were some limitations including that it was a web-panel survey and so only included those with internet access. The lack of pre-pandemic baseline data limited the researchers' ability to quantify change and so the data are based on people's ability to remember activities.

They also note the observed shift in some people reporting more engagement in virtual activities has implications for sexual and reproductive health.

"Whilst a lack of physical interaction with a [partner](#) may have a detrimental impact on sexual satisfaction and [people's](#) well-being, it may also bring public health benefits such as a decline in the transmission of sexually transmitted infections," added Professor Mercer.

More information: Catherine H Mercer et al, Impacts of COVID-19 on sexual behaviour in Britain: findings from a large, quasi-representative survey (Natsal-COVID), *Sexually Transmitted Infections* (2021). [DOI: 10.1136/sextrans-2021-055210](https://doi.org/10.1136/sextrans-2021-055210)

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