

Nationwide Survey Includes Data on Teenage Sex Habits

Surprising Numbers for Same-Sex Activity

By TAMAR LEWIN

The National Center for Health Statistics released the government's most comprehensive survey of American sexual practices and reproductive health yesterday, delving for the first time into such sensitive areas as the prevalence of oral sex among teenagers and same-sex activity among adults.

Oral sex among teenagers has in recent years become a topic of rampant speculation and little solid data, apart from a 1995 Urban Institute study of adolescent boys. The new statistics confirm that study's findings that oral sex is very much part of the teenage sexual repertory. According to the survey, more than half of all teenagers aged 15 to 19 have engaged in oral sex — including nearly a quarter of those who have never had intercourse.

Among the findings in the new study, "Sexual Behavior and Selected Health Measures," were the following:

¶Men age 30 to 44 have had a median of six to eight sexual partners in their lifetimes; women's median was about four.

¶Among both men and women age 15 to 44, about two-thirds have had only one sexual partner in the last year. Ten percent of the men and 7 percent of the women have had three or more partners in that time.

¶About 4 percent of men and women described themselves as homosexual or bisexual, but in a finding that surprised the researchers, 14 percent of the women aged 18 to 29 reported at least one homosexual experience, more than twice the proportion for young men.

The report offers new information about homosexuality in the United States. Among adults ages 15 to 44, almost 3 percent of men and 4 percent of women reported having a sexual experience with a member of the same sex within the past year, and over their lifetimes, 6 percent of men and 11 percent of women had such experiences. About 1 percent of men and 3 percent of women had had both male and female sexual partners in the previous 12 months.

Nearly 6 percent of all men ages 15 to 44 reported having oral sex with another man at some time in their lives, and nearly 4 percent reported having anal sex with another man.

The data comes from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth, a survey of 12,571 men and women ages 15 to 44. The survey contractor was the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research, which trained more than 200 women to collect the data by having the subject answer sensitive questions on a computer, without revealing the answers to the interviewer.

Although the National Center for Health Statistics has periodically conducted that survey among women for 32 years, the 2002 version was the first to include both sexes, and to move beyond fertility and child-bearing into broader questions of sexual behavior and sexual orientation.

The new findings on teenagers and oral sex have been of special interest to health experts.

"After years of provocative headlines and breathless stories based mostly on anecdote, we finally have some solid data," said Sarah Brown, director of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. "The news is probably not as bad as adults might have been led to believe, but it

is likely not as good as most parents might wish."

The proportion of teenagers who have given or received oral sex was slightly higher than the proportion who have had intercourse, the survey found, with 55 percent of the boys and 54 percent of the girls having given or received oral sex, while 49 percent of the boys and 53 percent of the girls have had intercourse.

"One thing that surprised me is that we expected, based on anecdotal evidence, that girls might be more likely to give oral sex and boys more likely to receive it, but we didn't find that at all," said Dr. Jennifer Manlove, of Child Trends, which, like Ms. Brown's group, released an analysis of the data, "There's more gender equality than we expected."

The government data does not provide any indication of the age at which oral sex first occurred, how often it occurred, or how many partners a teen had had. But the survey found that nearly all teenagers who have had sexual intercourse have also had oral sex: 88 percent of the boys and 83 percent of the girls.

"A very significant proportion of teens has had experience with oral sex, even if they haven't had sexual intercourse and may think of themselves as virgins," Dr. Manlove said. "We're not sure whether these teens

Attitudes on sex are changing, especially among women.

who have not had sexual intercourse are engaging in oral sex because they view it as a way to maintain their technical virginity or even because they regard it as an easy method of birth control."

While many of the findings in the government report parallel those of the last large-scale study of American sexual behavior, a 1992 study of 18- to 59-year-olds by the University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center, the lead author of the new study said it found a new and unexpected increase in lesbian activity among young women. "It may not be such a surprise among those of college age, who speak of LUG's — lesbians until graduation."

"There are signs of change among 15- to 29-year-old women, a group of women too young to have been included in the 1992 study," said William Mosher, the lead author.

When asked, "Have you ever had any sexual experience of any kind with any female?" 14 percent of the 18- to 29-year-old women said yes, compared with slightly under 10 percent of the 30- to 44-year-olds. That difference was surprising, Dr. Mosher said, since on questions about lifetime experience, older people usually report more than younger ones.

The study also asked about sexual attraction. Among men 18 to 44, 90 percent said they thought of themselves as heterosexual, 2 percent as homosexual, 2 percent as bisexual and 4 percent as "something else," findings similar to those in 1992.

Among women, 86 percent said they were attracted to only men and 10 percent "mostly to males." In the 1992 survey, only 3 percent said they were "mostly" attracted to males.