

First sex linked to better body image in men, not women

March 23 2011

Having sex for the first time can improve or degrade your self-image depending on whether you are male or female, according to Penn State researchers. On average, college-age males become more satisfied with their appearance after first intercourse, whereas college-age females become slightly less satisfied.

"We're not talking about 12-year-old girls having sex, so it's striking that even among these young women -- who are 17 or older when they first had sex -- their images of themselves went down," said Eva S.

Lefkowitz, associate professor of human development and family studies. "If on average they're feeling worse about themselves, it says something about their development of healthy sexuality and healthy sense of self and being."

Overall the researchers found that women became happier with their [physical appearance](#) from first to fourth year in college, and men became less satisfied with their appearance over the same time period. However, the researchers found the opposite directly after students had sex for the first time -- males were more satisfied with their appearance and females were less satisfied. The researchers reported their results in the current issue of the [Journal of Adolescence](#).

In previous studies, researchers found positive [body image](#) can reinforce risky sexual behavior in male college students, said Sara A. Vasilenko, graduate student in human development and family studies.

Vasilenko notes that one possible application of this study is that sexuality education programs should try to foster positive body image in both girls and boys. She said sexuality education for males should focus on feelings of [masculinity](#) and how to achieve those feelings without engaging in risky sexual behaviors. Sexuality education for females could focus on promoting positive body image.

"There has been a lot of research on what predicts [risky sexual behavior](#), but not a lot about how adolescents and [young adults](#) experience their sexual behavior and what might be some of the mental health and well-being outcomes," Vasilenko said. "Most of the research in that area looks at mental health outcomes of early sexual behavior relative to peers, finding that adolescents who have sex early, particularly females, might have more depression symptoms. I was interested in whether it would be more positive if individuals transition to sexual behavior when they were college-age, because that's a more normative time, when most people are sexually active."

The researchers surveyed 434 students asking them about their "attitudes and experiences in relationships with other people." All students were traditional freshmen -- age 17 to 19 years -- at the start of the project. The researchers administered the same survey to these students four times over the course of their college careers. Of the students surveyed, 100 engaged in sexual intercourse for the first time during the four-year study period.

The questionnaires asked participants to evaluate their appearance by rating their agreement with statements about their overall satisfaction with their appearance. The students also reported whether or not they had engaged in penetrative sex and if they had, to provide the month and year of their first time. Women's satisfaction with their appearance decreased after first intercourse, while men's satisfaction with appearance increased.

Vasilenko noted that a possible next step is to look at what factors make the first sexual intercourse experience positive or negative for different people. Future research might lead to a better understanding of what contributes to a more positive experience for females.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

Citation: First sex linked to better body image in men, not women (2011, March 23) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-03-sex-linked-body-image-men.html>

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