

What to expect when you're expecting: How will your sex life change during pregnancy and postpartum?

July 25 2023, by Erin T. Fitzpatrick and Samantha Jane Dawson



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Welcoming a new baby is often a joyous experience for couples. While many couples take time to prepare for the arrival of their bundle of joy,

fewer take time to prepare for challenges that can emerge in their sexual and romantic relationships during this period.

At The University of British Columbia's [Sexuality and Well-Being Lab \(SWell\)](#), we conduct research to understand the factors that lead some [couples](#) to thrive during [pregnancy](#) and the postpartum while others struggle. We then use this research to develop resources to help couples navigate these changes together.

What to expect

Sexual challenges during pregnancy and the postpartum are common. Up to [88% of people who give birth and 45% of their partners experience problems with their sex life during this time](#).

With shifting roles and responsibilities, the perinatal period (pregnancy and up to one year postpartum) can be hectic. It's understandable that sex may be on the back burner for a little while.

Studies conducted by our team and [our collaborators at Dalhousie University](#) have shown that many expectant and [new parents desire sex less often and/or at different times than their partner](#).

Many couples report having [distressing concerns about their sex life](#), such as body image or whether having sex during pregnancy will hurt the baby—[FYI, it won't](#). Approximately one in five people who gave birth [report moderate pain during sex that either starts in pregnancy or after the baby is born](#).

[Sexual problems usually get worse throughout pregnancy until three months postpartum](#), when they generally start improving.

If this seems daunting, you'll be encouraged to hear that despite sexual

challenges being common, [64% of couples say that they are still sexually satisfied during this time.](#)

This is great news because [having a strong sexual connection with your partner is important for your mental and physical health](#), and [contributes to the longevity of your relationship.](#)

The information gap

Expectant and new parent couples often don't know what to expect when it comes to their sex lives. In [a recent study](#) sampling 204 couples across Canada and the United States, we found that up to 78% of expectant and new parents received little to no information about changes to their sexuality. This is despite most individuals wanting to receive sex-related information!

Given that [sexual problems](#) are common and not inconsequential to the health of the romantic relationship, this lack of information for couples about what to expect regarding their perinatal sexuality is a problem.

On top of this information gap, the content of information that couples receive doesn't match what they want to receive.

In our study, we found that expectant and new parents most often received information about things like safety of sexual activity in pregnancy, contraception, when to resume sex in the postpartum and information only relevant to the partner who gave birth.

What's missing is reassurance that changes to sexuality are common and advice on how to manage changes. Information about the sexuality of the partner who didn't give birth is also lacking, even though [both members of the couple are affected](#). Expectant and new parents [want a variety of information to help them be better prepared.](#)

Research has also revealed that [psychological factors](#) such as [postpartum depression](#), [social factors](#) such as [divisions of labor](#) and relationship factors such as [coping together as a couple](#) are important for couples' sexual relationships in pregnancy and the postpartum.

Perhaps surprisingly, [biological factors](#)—such as whether the delivery was vaginal or cesarean, and the degree of tearing—[are not strong predictors of sexual problems during this time](#).

Translating knowledge into practice

[Health-care professionals feel they have a lack of knowledge and training to talk about sexual health with expectant and new parents](#), and worry that doing so would make them and/or their patients feel uncomfortable. However, our research showed that [most couples would welcome these conversations](#).

Health-care professionals need training on how to initiate conversations about perinatal [sexual health](#) with expectant and new parents, but they also need to know the latest research in this area.

Researchers at Dalhousie University recently produced [a series of short informational videos](#) that summarize recent research on sex after having a baby. The goal of #PostBabyHankyPanky is to normalize changes to postpartum sexuality, encourage conversations about sex between partners and help health-care professionals feel more prepared to have these discussions with their patients.

If you're a new or expectant parent and you've been noticing changes in your relationship, here's some good news: Our research shows that when couples receive more information about what to expect regarding changes to their sex lives in pregnancy or the [postpartum](#) (like what you've read here) they report greater desire, engage in sex more often,

feel more sexually satisfied and feel less worried about their sex lives.

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