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Government survey: Virgins at 40 do exist

New report also takes note of same-sex activity

by Cheryl Wetzstein

Yes, Virginia, there really are 40-year-old virgins.

They are scarce — about 1.2 percent of men and an even fewer 0.3 percent of women. But they exist, according to a new nationally representative report about Americans' sexual behavior, attraction and identity.

The March 3 report from the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) is chockablock with details about bedroom activities.

For instance, as many as 12 percent of American women under age 45 say they have had some sort of sexual experience with another woman, but only 1 percent identify themselves as lesbians.

Also, by the late 2000s, virginity was on the rise among young Americans. The 2006-2008 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) found that 29 percent of women and 27 percent of men under age 24 reported “no sexual contact with another person.” In the 2002 NSFG, only 22 percent of these young men and women said they were abstinent.

This rise is “small but significant,” said NCHS researcher Anjani Chandra, who co-authored the report with William D. Mosher, Casey Copen and Catlainn Sionean.

“Not surprisingly, teen behavior is shaped, in part, by what they think their friends and peers are doing. Consequently, a practical takeaway from this report is that teens clearly understand that not everyone is ‘doing it,’ — some are, some aren’t, and some are probably lying about it,” said Bill Albert, chief program officer of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

The new report is based on answers from some 13,500 men and women, ages 15 to 44. The federal government collects such data because it is “relevant to demographic and public health concerns,” such as fertility, teen pregnancy and transmission of sexual disease, the NCHS researchers said.

The new study shows that some things haven’t changed: By age 44, for instance, the vast majority of Americans (between 97 percent and 98 percent) have had vaginal sex with an opposite-sex partner.

Also the Playboy mentality lives on: Men outnumber women in the number of lifetime, opposite-sex partners, with men averaging about five partners, compared to women’s three. This “ubiquitous” finding about men vs. women has been seen consistently in American and international surveys, the researchers said.

New for this report were specific questions for women about same-sex activity. For the first time, women were asked whether they had oral sex with a woman, as well as whether they had “any sexual experience of any kind” with another woman.

The addition of the oral sex questions allowed researchers to see that while 12.5 percent of women (about 7.7 million if extrapolated to the whole U.S. populace, ages 15-44), had some kind of homosexual experience, a smaller portion (9.3 percent or 5.7 million) had oral sex with a woman.

When the survey asked about sexual self-identification, it found that 1 percent (616,352 women) described themselves as homosexuals or lesbians, and another 3.5 percent or 1.9 million women said they were bisexual.

Regarding men, the survey asked four specific questions about same-sex behavior as well as their self-identity. The new survey found that 5.2 percent of men (3.2 million) reported homosexual experiences, but again fewer — 1.7 percent or 944,452 — identified as homosexual or gay. Another 1 percent of men, or 611,116, said they were bisexuals.

The survey tracks a variety of data on sexual activity, plus education, race, age and marital status to understand when and how sexual disease might be spread, the researchers said, noting that 86 percent of HIV cases were “acquired through sexual behavior.”

Other highlights of “Sexual Behavior, Sexual Attraction, and Sexual Identity in the United States: Data from the 2006-2008 National Survey of Family Growth”:

- Once men and women marry, they appear to stay faithful: Ninety-seven percent of wives and 94 percent of husbands reported only one sex partner in the last 12 months. Cohabiting couples were also highly likely to be faithful, but not as strongly as marrieds: Thirteen percent of cohabiting women and 15 percent of cohabiting men reported multiple sex partners in the last year.
- The survey found that many men and women who had same-sex sexual experiences also had sex with opposite-sex partners. However, it found that few people (around 8 percent of the women and less than 4 percent of the men) with same-sex experiences were currently married to an opposite-sex partner.