World Meeting on Sexual Medicine

Infertility and sexuality: Effect on the couple

Lúcia Alves S Lara
Gynecologist and Sexologist
Sexual Medicine Service, Department of Gynecology and Obstetrics, Faculty of Medicine, São Paulo University

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Infertility

- Infertility is defined as the inability to conceive after 12 months of regular unprotected sexual intercourse.

- The prevalence rates of such condition vary from 7-17% worldwide.

- Infertility is a social, psychological, economic, and medical problem affecting couples all over the world.

Onat G & Beji NK, 2012; Klemetti R et al., 2010; Oskay UY et al., 2010
Infertility is distressing for couples...

- And this condition may be a severely distressing experience for many couples (Galhardo et al. 2011).

- And may affect sexuality that is a fundamental part of the individual’s life.

- The couple is particularly sensitive to the crisis that infertility may cause

  → They often report quality-of-life impairments, especially in terms of sexuality, self-esteem and partnership quality (Wischmann T, et al., 2014)
In fact...

- Sexual problems are common among infertile couples: erectile dysfunction, hypoactive sexual desire, decreased sexual activity (Huyghe E et al., 2013)

- There are indications of a loss of spontaneous sexuality during the experience of infertility (Wischmann T, et al., 2014)

- Depression is one of the main psychological disorders associated with infertility; a factor that may be detrimental for infertile individuals (Drosdzol and Skrzypulec 2009b)

- QoL seems to be similarly affected in both infertile men and women (Chachamovich J et al., 2009)
Women may be affected in their sexual function due to the diagnosis of infertility and/or after unsucceeded treatment
Also...

- Infertile women have higher risk of depression and anxiety related to (Al-Homaidan HT, 2011)
  - The diagnosis of infertility (Nelson, et al. 2008)
  - The duration and cause of infertility (Ramazanzadeh F et al., 2004)
  - Their partner’s infertility (Ogawa M et al., 2011)
  - Pressure from family for the couple to have a child (Al-Homaidan HT, 2011).
  - Lower self-esteem (Wischmann T, et al., 2014)
Depression and anxiety symptoms vs. female sexual function?

- It has been widely demonstrated that depressive symptoms are associated with impairments of sexual function and satisfaction (Baldwin DS 2001; Pakpour, et al. 2012)

- Depressive women show inhibited sexual arousal, inhibited orgasm and less sexual pleasure during intercourse (Frohlich P & Meston C, 2002)
Does infertility impact negatively on male sexuality?

- **Infertile men:**
  
  ✓ Show a reduction in sexual desire and satisfaction (Ramezanzadeh et al., 2006)

  ✓ Have lower overall life satisfaction, heightened distress and higher treatment-related stress (Connolly et al., 1992; Beutel et al., 1999)

  ✓ Have higher rates of erectile dysfunction and premature ejaculation, and less intercourse satisfaction (Monga, et al., 2004; Gao J et al., 2013)

  ✓ Higher prevalence of anxiety and depression when compared to fertile men (Gao J et al., 2013)
Premature ejaculation and erectile dysfunction are associated with anxiety and depression: two conditions that act together to impair sexual function

(Gao J et al., 2013)
A cross-sectional analysis of 357 men in infertile couples

Male partners in couples who perceive isolated male factor infertility have a lower sexual and personal quality of life (Smith JF et al., 2009)
A cross-sectional study with 1,298 infertile men at the average age of 35, showed that:

- Two years after being diagnosed with infertility, the average monthly coital frequency was seven (IQR 5-10; range 0-40)

- 24% of couples were having intercourse less or as much as 4 times a month.

Perlis N et al., 2013
And the factors that affected coital frequency were: age and erectile dysfunction.

Men with better erectile function had 1.12 times higher odds of having more frequent coitus.

Perlis N et al., 2013
To evaluate the sexual function of men and women in infertile couples

- We conducted a literature review searching for articles published between 2000 and 2010 which assessed the sexual function of couples during infertility treatment.

- The studies selected were those that evaluated sexual function through validated questionnaires.

- Of the 134 articles identified, only 14 articles met our inclusion criteria; 7 studies evaluated males’ sexuality and 7 evaluated females’ sexuality.

Ferraresi S, Lara LA et al., 2013
Among men

- Four studies identified infertility as a major risk factor for erectile dysfunction, with rates ranging from 2 to 30%.

- One study found that sexual desire is reduced in about 52% of infertile men.

- One study did not find changes in sexual response.

- Two studies found that sexual and marital satisfaction were reduced after the diagnosis of infertility and assisted reproductive treatment.

Ferraresi S, Lara LA et al., 2013
Among women

• Five studies found that the risks of sexual dysfunction were higher after the diagnosis of infertility
• Two studies reported high rates of arousal dysfunction and anorgasmia.
• One study showed a frequency of 83% of anorgasmia, 80% of hypoactive sexual desire, 67% of dyspareunia, and 6.7% of vaginismus
• Two studies reported no changes in sexual function
• One found that only 6.3% of infertile women reported a worsening of their sex lives

Ferraresi S, Lara LA et al., 2013
Summary

• ED is the most frequent sexual complaint among infertile men which was associated to both depressive symptoms and infertility

• The main complaint of infertile women was usually related to the marital relationship
It is possible that sexual dysfunction of one partner may act as a factor of impairment of sexual function in the infertile couple.

However, this is a controversial theme.
Comparison between 30 recently diagnosed infertile couples with 30 infertile couples undergoing Intrauterine Insemination and 52 fertile couples.

- Men of all the three groups scored higher in sexual satisfaction, sexual desire and orgasm than their female partners.

- Men in the first group had lower scores on all the subscales when compared with treated group and controls.

- Women belonging to first and second groups showed an impairment of sexual arousal, satisfaction, lubrication and orgasm when compared to fertile controls.

Merci R et al., 2012
Comparison between infertile couples and couples seeking elective sterilization showed that:

- 83% of infertile couples reported feeling social pressures to conceive.

- No statistically significant impact on sexual functioning in women was observed.

- While men, in the infertile couples, had lower erectile function and lower intercourse satisfaction scores.

Monga M et al., 2004
In contrast…

Studies published from 1990 to 2011 showed that:

→ Male factor infertility did not have a negative marital impact.

→ Infertile male expressed higher marital satisfaction than their female partners.

→ On the other hand, infertile females had significantly less stable marital relationship compared to fertile females, which was associated with their treatment experience.

Tao P, Coates R, Maycock, 2012
Nevertheless, there are contradictory results concerning the satisfaction with the relationship and the closeness between the two partners.

Some studies have shown that infertility is linked to the highest relationship instability and the lowest sexual satisfaction.

Other studies implied that infertile couples did not differ from fertile couples in marital relationship.

On the other hand, some studies have shown that the marital relationship seems to get stronger and more supportive.

(Coëffîn-Driol & Giami A, 2004)
It is worth it to highlight that some conditions that are prevalent among infertile couples may impact marital relationship and their sexual relationship.

The couples express a loss of spontaneity in sex that can be related to the strategies they set up to maximize their chances of pregnancy and to medical care (Reder F et al, 2009).
For example

- The prevalence of psychosexual problems is high among infertile couples, mainly in couples who did not have success with the treatment (Perlis N et al., 2013, Nene UA et al., 2005; Boxer A.D., 1996)

- Depression is high prevalent among infertile couples, mainly in those couples with long duration of infertility (Ashkani H et al., 2006)

- Self-esteem is lower in the couples with longer infertility duration (keramat A et al., 2014).
Case-control study

In comparison with fertile couples, infertile couples showed:

- Lower self-esteem and lower marital satisfaction

Such conditions may provoke relationship instability

Low sexual satisfaction

Keramat, et al. 2014
In contrast, some studies have shown that infertility may even strengthen the couple’s relationship.
Cross-sectional study

- Interview with 40 infertile couples indicated that:

  Sexual activity decreased as the number of childless years increased.

  However, the marital relationship got stronger and more supportive.

Nene UA et al, 2005
The fact that they share experiences of stress during infertility treatment, may improve the marital relationship, which may increase dyadic cohesion.

Men and women in couples who perceive equal levels of social infertility stress, report high levels of marital adjustment.

When women feel a similar need for parenthood as their male partner, they report significantly high levels of marital satisfaction.

(Peterson BD et al., 2003)
Also…

- Several unsuccessful treatment attempts are associated with good dyadic cohesion.

- Treatment may even improve sexual parameters for both women and men, thus increasing significantly the marital relationship.

Bayar U et al. 2014; Repokari L et al., 2007
A recent cross-sectional study conducted with 385 infertile couples

Those with higher educational level, higher monthly income, living in urban areas, shorter duration of marriage, less time of infertility, and male gender were associated with better QoL status

and

They were more satisfied with their sexual life

keramat A et al., 2014
But, it is important to highlight the heterogeneity of the studies from different countries ...

What implies that, the consequence of infertility on sexuality among couples differ in different cultures
Cultural consequence of infertility among couples

- The psycho-social consequences suffered by infertile couples are severe mainly in poor countries.

- A determinant for the types of psycho-social consequences of infertility is whether the infertility is caused by a female or male factor.

- Female infertility is linked to domestic violence, union dissolution and sexual dysfunction among infertile couples.

Dhont N et al., 2011; Akyuz A et al., 2013
In Northern Ghana…

- Couples without children are denied membership in the ancestral world, thereby losing the opportunity to live again.
- Infertile couples are socially stigmatized and excluded from leadership roles in their communities.
- The social consequences of infertility are severe, particularly for women.
- Both males and females are engaged in sex with multiple partners to prove their fertility.

→ Infertility among Ghanaians has important consequences for social interactions, marital stability and mental health.

Tabong PT, Adongo PB. 2013; Fledderjohann JJ, 2012
Among Polish couples:

- The highest relationship instability and the lowest sexual satisfaction in both, female and male partners

- Are associated with the diagnosis of male factor and infertility duration

Drosdzol A, Skrzypulec V, 2009
Among Polish couples:

- And age, annual income, duration of infertility, and history of unsuccessful IVF treatment
- Had a negative correlation with psychological health status and marital quality.

Wang K et al., 2007
Conclusion

- There are conflicting data on the sexual function of infertile couples.

- The impact of infertility on couples sexuality vary according to different cultures.

- Sexual dysfunction among infertile individuals, could be a consequence of the diagnosis, investigation and treatment of infertility.

- There are evidences that anxiety and depression are associated with the diagnosis and treatment of infertility among couples.
Infertility has a negative impact on women's self-esteem.

Infertile women have higher risk of depression and anxiety related to the diagnosis of infertility, the duration of infertility, their partner’s infertility.

Men may show HSD, decreased sexual activity, premature ejaculation and ED after being diagnosed as the responsible for the infertility.

Primary infertile couples should be assessed in their sexual function before the process of assisted reproduction.
During the treatment for infertility it is important for physicians to systematically open discussion on sexual issues.

In some cases it is necessary to help patients rebuild their sexuality as a source of pleasure to the end of the period of assisted reproduction.

More studies need to be carried out on the sexual function previous to the diagnosis of infertility among couples.
The studies on the infertile couples’ sexuality are mostly descriptive and presents infertility as a deleterious experience for both women and men.

Divergent samples and assessment instruments, together with gender differences regarding how they face infertility, mean that, so far, there are no valid findings about sexual disorders among infertile couples.

Future research should find an appropriate way of addressing these methodological shortcomings.
Finally, there is a need for high-quality, prospective studies using consistent methodology to accurately evaluate the impact of infertility on sexuality of infertile couples.
Thank you!!!