

# Married women here have less sex than desired: Study

Stress, fatigue among reasons; findings have significant bearing on Singapore's fertility rate

**Theresa Tan**  
Senior Social Affairs  
Correspondent

Married women in their peak childbearing age here have a lot less sex than they desire, thwarted by stress and fatigue, a new study has found.

This has significant bearing on the length of time they take to get pregnant, contributing to Singapore's dismal fertility rate.

The study, the first here to examine the sex lives of married women in their peak childbearing ages, found that married women aged between 25 and 29 have sex an average of 3.7 times a month.

Those aged between 30 and 34 have sex 2.6 times, on average, a month.

The women interviewed said that they would rather have twice as much sex as they actually did.

A representative sample of 657 married women were part of the sur-

vey by Assistant Professor Tan Poh Lin from the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

She found that about 15 per cent of couples did not have sex at all during the 14 weeks when the study tracked their sexual activity.

Among those who did have sex, only about one in four couples would conceive within three months, compared with about two couples if they have sex eight times a month, she said, citing previous American research on the topic.

Prof Tan, who will present her findings at a conference organised by the Population Association of America in April, said that her independent research is the first here to examine the coital frequency of married women at their peak childbearing ages of between 25 and 34, and to understand the effects of stress and fatigue on their sex lives.

She said: "Coital frequency is important for two reasons.

"First, it affects marital quality and satisfaction. Second, it is a determinant of the age at childbearing and hence, it affects the fertility rate, as well as the prevalence of infertility and miscarriages."

For her study, the women had to record the dates of their sexual activity over 14 weeks and the levels of stress and fatigue they felt in the previous two weeks.

Prof Tan said that stress and fatigue help explain why sexual activity among the women was "so low" – three times less than the average for Americans, based on one American study. She also found that couples here also have more sex during weekends, as they may be more relaxed or have more energy when they do not have to work.

Singapore has long struggled with a plunging birth rate, despite a host of measures, from giving parents a Baby Bonus cash gift to boosting maternity leave and the number of childcare places.

Its total fertility rate (TFR) has been below the replacement level of 2.1 babies since the mid-1970s.

The TFR for 2018 was 1.14, the lowest on record.

3.7

Average number of times a month married women aged between 25 and 29 have sex.

2.6

Average number of times a month married women aged between 30 and 34 have sex. The women interviewed said they would rather have twice as much sex as they actually did.

1.14

Singapore's 2018 total fertility rate.

NUS sociologist Tan Ern Ser said he was not surprised by the study's findings, given that age, fatigue and the lack of work-life balance here are co-related to sexual activity and the chances of conceiving.

Prof Tan Poh Lin says that there are no easy solutions to boost couples' sex lives here, pointing to Singapore's relentless rat race and cost-of-living pressures.

She added: "The findings suggest that our high stress, high fatigue lifestyles are not compatible with healthy marital sex lives, and can weaken marriages and increase the risk of infertility due to longer waiting times to pregnancy.

"Hence, fewer working hours and more flexible work arrangements may not do enough to address the core issue of stress, which is the pressure to visibly meet or exceed work performance expectations."

Relationship counsellor Martha Tara Lee, who provides sexuality and intimacy coaching, said that many of her clients reported having less sex than they would like due to long working hours.

She suggested that couples schedule time for intimacy and make it a priority.

"Couples can text each other to check in during the day and ask if they are able to reach home earlier.

"It is also important to simplify your life and not try to squeeze too much into your schedule so that you have time for each other."

[theresat@sph.com.sg](mailto:theresat@sph.com.sg)

• Additional reporting by  
Melissa Heng