

Married couples had more sex during circuit breaker: Study

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A study that found married women here are reporting increased sexual activity amid the pandemic offers hope that this could potentially help to boost Singapore's ultra-low birth rate.

The study, which tracked more than 400 married women here from 2018, found that they had sex more frequently during the circuit breaker from April 7 to June 1 in 2020, when all non-essential activities ground to a halt to

stem the spread of Covid-19.

Dr Tan Poh Lin, the author of the study, said it also found that the increased frequency of sex persisted in June 2020 after the circuit breaker ended and more couples returned to their workplaces.

There is a clear link between low sexual activity and the time it takes to get pregnant, leading to postponed or forgone births, she noted.

Dr Tan, an assistant professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore (NUS), said: "Clearly, these have ramifications for Singapore's demographic profile."

Singapore's total fertility rate fell

to a historic low of 1.1 births per resident female in 2020.

The longitudinal study, which was published in the *Journal of Sexual Medicine* last month, is the first Singapore study to examine the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on married couples' sexual health, and it gives an insight into how their sexual behaviour has changed over time.

The study involved 409 married women in their 20s and 30s, with an average age of 32 in 2020. They are either Singaporeans or married to one, and they were wed for an average of six years.

Eight in 10 of them have at least one child aged six or younger. And

a third of the women earn \$4,000 or more a month. The women were first interviewed in 2018 and they were asked to record details, such as the dates they had sex and their average level of stress and fatigue, over 14 weeks.

The women were asked similar questions in May and June 2020. The study found that:

- Couples had sex an average of 0.78 times a week in 2020, up from 0.68 times a week in 2018. The increase is statistically significant, Dr Tan said.
- The proportion of couples who did not have sex at least once a week fell from 54 per cent in

2018 to 50 per cent in 2020.

- The days when couples had sex were more spread out through the week. Before the pandemic, sexual activity was higher from Fridays to Sundays and lower on Mondays.

Dr Tan said the study also found that stress, fatigue and marital satisfaction continue to be the significant determinants of sexual activity and frequency.

The work-from-home arrangement during the circuit breaker was, to her surprise, not a major factor behind the increased intimacy among couples.

Still, she said the more flexible

work schedules and less time spent on commuting during the pandemic would have helped.

Another factor behind the increase in sexual frequency could be that couples have "pulled closer together during turbulent times", she said, adding that the study did not ask the women why they had more sex.

Dr Tan, who does research into Singapore's extremely low fertility rate, said she is still studying the finding's impact on fertility, but added that a baby boom in the near future is unlikely.

This is because the pandemic has led to an economic crisis and major uncertainty about the future, and

many couples all over the world are not keen to expand their families. However, if the external factors, such as the economic slump, that deter couples from having more children ease, coupled with the provision of more flexible working arrangements that arose from the pandemic, couples could decide to have more children, Dr Tan said.

She also noted that the frequency of couples here having sex is still very low, which has bearing on the time the women take to get pregnant, among other things.

Couples in her study have sex an average of three or four times a month, compared with six or seven times monthly based on surveys in the United States, she said.

The study found that women who are more stressed and more tired tend to have less sex.

Dr Tan said: “Sexual intimacy has been linked to marital satisfaction, although the link runs both ways as those who have more sex may also tend to report greater marital happiness.”

The study was funded by the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, and the data was collected by Nexus Link. Dr Tan’s research assistant Scott Chua Lee also helped in the study.

Relationship counsellor and clinical sexologist Martha Lee, of Eros Coaching, said that many of her clients have sex once a week or once a fortnight.

She noted that many of her clients are stressed by their jobs, adding: “It is less a matter of unwillingness to have sex or the lack of sexual desire but the reality of life – couples being busy, tired and stressed.

“The stress and pressures to

keep their jobs are real. Tired people do not want sex.”

A 30-year-old account manager, who wed a few months before the circuit breaker, said she and her husband, 33, had more sex in the first few weeks of that period. They were intimate two or three times in a week then, as they spent more time at home and were less tired at the end of the day.

The woman, who has no children and who declined to be named, said: “But towards the end of the circuit breaker, we felt the pandemic fatigue and we had sex less.

“My mood was quite down from being stressed about the uncertain future. So we did more hobbies together, like playing board games or following social media trends like baking.”

She said they have sex once a week or less now.

Dr Rayner Tan, a visiting research fellow at the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health at NUS who has done research on Singaporeans’ sexual behaviour, said it is important not to conflate sexual frequency with a couple’s desire to have children.

He said: “Couples may be less sexually active, but they may engage in periods of sexual activity to have children. On the flipside, with contraception, couples may engage in a high level of sexual activity, but nevertheless not consider having a child.

“From a policy perspective, acknowledging these practicalities will help us design targeted and effective policies.”

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• Additional reporting by
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