

femmail MAGAZINE

39%
of women would rather give up sex than their mobile phone

20%
are having no sex at all – many in the 65+ age range

31%
of women have pretended to be asleep to avoid sex



Picture: CHRIS CRAYMER/TRUNK ARCHIVE

30 years ago, the Mail carried out a landmark survey that revealed what really goes on in the nation's bedrooms. Now we've asked a new generation the same questions – with startling results that reveal...

The Great British sex drought

by Louise Atkinson

THE notion was startling. When sex and fertility specialists were asked why more couples were turning to IVF in order to conceive, they said it was because we are not having enough sex to do it naturally. At a conference earlier this year,

eminent sex experts described a nation having perhaps as little as half as much sex as we had '30 years ago'. Our busy, distracted lives, they said, mean we see sex as a chore, not a pleasure. Among

them was Allan Pacey, professor of andrology at the University of Sheffield, who told the Mail: 'Couples seem to have very different expectations of what a healthy sex life is. There are people

having sex less than once a week, only every few weeks, or not at all, because modern life has taken the joy out of it and there are too many other things like work and emails competing for our attention.' For doctors and academics, it is an article of faith: we are having less sex than we used to, or than our parents did. But how much less? And why?

In an age of internet dating, widespread

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pornography and no fault divorce, such a decline seems baffling. In a bid to discover what's really going on beneath the nation's duvet, the Daily Mail last month commissioned an in-depth survey of attitudes towards sex, asking more than 1,000 men and women — both single and in relationships — from right across the British Isles to be frank and fearless and reveal the no-holds-barred truth about their sex lives. What's more, to test the theory that distracting modern life has had a calamitous effect on our sex lives in the past three decades, we mirrored some of the questions in a similar Mail sex survey of 1991 — 31 years ago. The results will shock you. For yes, the nation's sex life has indeed changed beyond all recognition ...

SO HOW OFTEN ARE WE HAVING SEX?

IT IS a common lament among the midlife coffee-morning set that everyone thinks they're horribly deprived of the regular and enthusiastic sex they deserve — and now, it seems, our survey bears this out. Statistics from the early 1990s showed that 50 per cent of us were having sex at least once a week. But our 2022 survey shows sex appears to have plummeted down the marital 'to do' list. Today, only 19 per cent have sex once a week on a regular basis. However, when you combine that figure with the 16 per cent of enthusiasts happily at it 'several' times a week you reach a slightly healthier figure of 35 per cent of the population having sex once a week or more. But that's still a significant 15 per cent drop in 30 years. Fourteen per cent say they have sex 'several times a month', while six per cent do it monthly and nine per cent make an effort only on high days and holidays. One in five (many of them in the 65+ age range) is having no sex at all. Derbyshire-based married couple, Sarah, 37, and her 38-year-old husband say they're surprised to have found themselves in what has turned out to be a sexless marriage. 'When my husband and I got together 20 years ago, sex was great and we'd be ripping each other's clothes off three or four times a week,' says Sarah.

HOWEVER, things changed after the birth of their first daughter, who is now 11, and although they have had two more daughters, aged nine and five, they haven't had sex since their youngest was born. 'Our marriage is happy, I still want intimacy, but I'm afraid I have zero sex drive for my husband. These days, sex just isn't a priority for me,' she adds. 'I think it's pretty normal to go off sex when you're in a long-term relationship, but unfortunately there is a degree of shame and stigma surrounding this. So many women end up feeling they should be the perfect wife, mother, housekeeper and a sexual dynamo, too.' It's a similar story for business owner Georgina, 32, and her husband, 36, who is a mechanical engineer. 'Looking at us, you'd think we're an attractive 30-something couple who are bound to be at it like rabbits — but that isn't the case at all,' says Georgina. 'We're having a great time with full social lives as well as our careers, and our busy routines just don't leave us time for having sex.'

After being together for eight years, they got married during the pandemic: 'Being stuck together meant we lost interest in being intimate,' says Georgina. 'It isn't that we don't want to have sex — we just want to do other things more. Since we're lucky enough to live in London, we'd far rather go to the zoo or to the cinema than head to the bedroom.' Sometimes after date night — especially if there is alcohol

AFTER work trips forced them apart for a week, Liz and Leigh Brown celebrated their reunion by snuggling up together on the sofa. They swapped news and caught up on their Netflix shows before agreeing to head upstairs for an early night. But rather than a night of passion, they merely exchanged a peck on the cheek before turning away and falling asleep. Although they love each other, with two demanding jobs, three children, two horses, a dog, five ducks and five acres of land to tend to, sex comes so far down the list of the Browns' priorities — a situation they are both now resigned to — it happens no more than a handful of times a year.

'Given the choice between sex and an extra half-an-hour of sleep, we both choose sleep,' says Liz, 37, a military photographer. 'On the rare occasions we have time alone at home, there are other things that we would rather do, like putting the ironing away or cleaning the cooker. I do realise how awful that sounds — and our younger selves would be appalled — but modern family life, with all its demands, just isn't conducive to a regular sex life. We have teenagers who are around in the evenings and think nothing of wandering the house, raiding the fridge at midnight, and a six-year-old who climbs into our bed in the early hours and then is up again at daybreak. Like most families these days, we need two incomes to cover our outgoings and both travel a fair bit for work, which leaves one parent at home holding the fort. Living in rural Derbyshire, that involves a lot of taxi-ing our children, to Army Cadet meetings, pre-dawn swimming training, and to school. Although we outsource a fair bit now — having learnt the hard way that we can't do everything — our two horses still need taking care of, then there's walking our dog and maintaining the land around our house. Who on earth would have the energy, or inclination, for sex on top of all that?' The Browns agree they found it much easier to make time for intimacy when their children were young and, until four years ago, made love most weeks. They struggle to understand couples with small children whose sex lives go off the boil, given that little ones are tucked up in bed in the early evening, and say they have found it far

more challenging now that at least one of theirs is awake whenever they are. Neither can bear the thought of their children, aged 16, 13 and six, hearing or, worse still, walking in on their parents in the act. And, contrary to the belief that men feel deprived by a lack of action in the bedroom, Leigh, 37, a specialist engineering consultant, is just as willing as his wife to allow their sex life to stay on the backburner for the next few years, while work and family responsibilities take precedence. 'I'm open with male friends about the fact Liz and I rarely have sex these days and most of those with demanding jobs and kids in the house completely get it,' says Leigh. 'Some claim they will disappear upstairs with their wives and be as noisy as they like while their kids are downstairs watching TV. I'm not sure they're always telling the truth as it sounds like male bravado to me. Either way, that's something Liz and I could never do. There were a couple of instances in my childhood that I'd rather not revisit, when I remember hearing noises coming from my parents' bedroom, and I cannot bear the thought of embarrassing our kids in that way. We have an open-door policy and never want them to feel uncomfortable coming into our bedroom. Liz and Leigh go away as a

couple no more than once or twice a year, usually to a social event linked to Liz's work, so the opportunities for carefree sex are few and far between. 'The last time was in early May, when they checked into a hotel in Buckinghamshire to remedy the situation. The couple had been celibate for at least four months before that — and have gone as long as six months without sex in the past. They had sex before dinner and again the following morning, proving that the desire and attraction is still very much there. Who, I wonder, instigated it and wasn't it a little, well, awkward after going so long without?' Neither of us had to make a move, we both knew it would happen,' says Liz, laughing. 'Even though we were as tired as ever after a demanding week, we wouldn't dream of not taking full advantage of being alone in a hotel room for the night. I guess it might have been awkward if it had been the first time we'd seen one another undressed for months, but we've always been very relaxed about our bodies around each other. We sleep naked and Leigh will brush his teeth while I'm in the bath. It was lovely, and afterwards Leigh said: "Why don't we do this more often?" And I said: "I don't know!" 'Deep down we both feel we

involved — Georgina says they will have sex, but she says there isn't any pressure from either side for it to happen. 'I've never felt more loved and secure in my marriage,' she says. 'I think my husband is the sexiest man alive, and I hope he feels I'm sexy, too. But I honestly think that having sex several times a week is a "front" that loads of people feel they need to put on.' The only sticking point in Georgina and her husband's situation is that they are hoping to

start trying for a family later this year and Georgina is conscious of the commitment involved in conceiving: 'I know we'll need to plan to have sex — we'll probably have to put it in our diaries, otherwise it will never happen. Hopefully when there's a goal, it will be easier for us to have sex regularly.'

Five acres, three children, two horses ... and NO SEX

One couple's very frank admission

by Helen Carroll

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should make more time for it, but as soon as we were back home, faced with work, a laundry mountain, homework supervision, cooking and clearing up after the family dinner every night, neither of us had the energy to even think about it.' Aware of the importance of making time for their relationship, Liz and Leigh have discussed driving their Land Rover to one of their far-flung fields and making the most of the peace and quiet. 'If the kids are all out, playing or walking the dog, we'll joke: "Well, we've got ten minutes, wink, wink," but we never see it through,' says Leigh. 'There's always a lawn to mow, a uniform to iron or some other chore we need to be getting on with. It's not because of a lack of attraction, I fancy Liz even more as time goes on. 'She's beautiful — I tell her, though maybe not every day — and I'm in awe of how amazing she is, both at her job and as a wife and mother. She says she's still attracted to me too — in fact she's always saying she hit the jackpot when she met me — but marriage is about a lot more than sex.' Although Liz's parents are happy to help look after the children, the Browns use most of their 'childcare credits' on school pick-ups or holiday cover. They feel it would be taking advantage of their kindness to ask them to have the kids overnight more than once or twice a year. As with

29% of women think that men have a better time in bed

23% (mostly women) admit to faking an orgasm during sex

SO WHY AREN'T WE HAVING SEX? WE'RE TOO BUSY A RATHER alarming 13 per cent

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Perhaps not surprisingly, in both cases, the refusal comes from twice as many women as men.

WE'RE GLUED TO OUR SCREENS THIRTY years ago there were only four TV channels and no box sets or streaming services to tempt you to stay up past bedtime. But our survey showed that a stagger-

ing 91 per cent of us are quite happy to while away the evenings watching television or films compared with the 46 per cent who said their idea of a good night in was having sex. 'If you don't go to bed at the same time, your chances of intimacy decrease dramatically,' says marital therapist and author Andrew G. Marshall. 'An evening spent watching television doesn't necessarily have to ruin your sex life. If you watch something together, preferably side-by-side



Picture: L-R Hair & Make-up: DESMOND GRUNDY

We've put our sex life on hold: Leigh and Liz Brown

most couples, sex was a huge priority early on in their relationship, despite Liz already being mum to two children, aged four and one, when they met 12 years ago. (The children no longer see their dad and Leigh has been a very willing father figure for most of their lives.) Liz was a teacher while Leigh worked as a breakdown mechanic back then, and would frequently drop by in the early hours after a night shift for what she teased him was 'a booty call'.

'I'd be up early to take the children to nursery before work but somehow, back then, I had the energy for sex as well,' she says. 'Even six years ago, after our youngest was born, our sex life resumed within three weeks. However, in those days, the kids were in bed by 8pm and we had the whole evening to ourselves.' Finding time and space for intimacy became harder four years ago, when Liz and Leigh both began travelling more for work, the elder children started going to bed later and the youngest would wake and want to climb into bed with his parents.

'At first, we both worried that the lack of sex meant we'd gone off each other, that it was the beginning of the end,' says Liz. 'Thankfully, we're a couple that talks about everything and neither of us has any doubts about our commitment to each other. We're both very tactile and say, "I love you" most days, so it didn't take long for us to feel reassured.' The Browns know couples who schedule sex to make sure it happens, but believe a lack of spontaneity would take the fun out of it for them. 'I'd prefer never to do it than know that on a Friday night it's going to happen, come hell or high water,' says Liz. Leigh feels the same and we both agree that these couples are no happier, or closer, than we are, just because they can say they have sex every week. 'You have to play the long game in marriage, and in another three years there will be weekends when the elder children are out and the youngest is away camping with the Cubs. We're confident we'll still love and fancy one another enough to make the most of the time together.'

third person in our marriage,' she admits. Although she and her spouse have been together for 15 years, married for ten and have two children aged eight and two, Ivy says they now only have sex once a month or so. 'When we relax, we do so on our own and that means screentime,' says Ivy. 'I started my own business three years ago, and because a lot of what I do is carried out on my phone, I never really disconnect — I'm forever checking emails and sorting tasks. I don't feel bad about neglecting my husband, because he is more than happy to spend five hours a night playing on his Xbox. He has a high-pressure job and that's how he likes to relax.' There is still love between us, and we have great fun when we go on special dates together, but there's none of the burning passion we once shared. It just seems like there's little time or energy left for sex.'

SOCIAL MEDIA IS TO BLAME ALTHOUGH 55 per cent of people say they like nothing more than to curl up with a good book before bed (a figure heavily weighted to the over-55s), it's sad to note that 67 per cent of our respondents spend their evenings scrolling through social media. Notably it was the 18 to 34-year-

LESS SEX, MORE PARTNERS

WE MAY be having less sex, but we're having more lovers. Thirty years ago most people had just a handful of sexual partners before settling down. Surveys in the 1990s found men averaged nine partners and women a meagre three and a half in their lifetime. Nearly three-quarters of men and more than 90 per cent of women had fewer than ten partners. Our 2022 survey found only 67 per cent stopped before they reached ten sexual partners — 66 per cent of men and 68 per cent of women. Thirteen per cent of men and women put themselves into the '10-15' category, with ten per cent of women and 18 per cent of men admitting to notching up 15 or more.

BUT WE ARE HAVING FEWER AFFAIRS

THIRTY years ago, when we asked if it was acceptable for people who are married or living together to have affairs we were surprised when 12 per cent in a committed relationship said yes. But when we asked if they'd actually had an affair with someone while either party was married to someone else, an astonishing 29 per cent of married/cohabiting people put their hands up. Twenty-nine per cent of married people having affairs! For this survey we repeated the question, asking married people whether they'd had extra-marital sex in the past year. This time, only 9 per cent said yes — double the number of men to women.



NOT TONIGHT DARLING...

TWENTY-SEVEN per cent (mostly women) said they'd lied about being tired, stressed or ill to avoid having sex. Twenty-three per cent (again, mostly women) admitted they'd faked an orgasm during sex. Twenty-two per cent confessed they had pretended to be asleep to avoid having sex (31 per cent women v 12 per cent men, but with a possibly acceptable peak during the child-rearing years of 35-44 per cent). Fifty-one per cent said they had never deployed avoidance tactics (70 per cent men).

olds who said they were 'very' (as opposed to 'quite') likely to spend their evenings on social media. 'The problem with smartphones and 24-hour communication is that the old boundaries have collapsed,' says Andrew. 'We live in a world of distraction, which means you can get an important work email just ten minutes before bed — sexual desire needs time to bubble up and any mood can be instantly destroyed by an uncomfortable text or tweet.' One big concern is that so many of us reach for our phone each morning to turn off the alarm, and automatically start scrolling — effectively becoming embedded in the cycle of clicks and 'likes' before we've even acknowledged the person lying beside us. Twenty nine per cent of those who share a bed with a partner confessed to spending up to ten minutes on their phone when they wake up, and 18 per cent said they spend up to 20 minutes scrolling in bed. In each case, the phone users are typically more likely to be women than men. 'Using a phone in bed is a big turn-off,' adds Andrew. 'Even if you're checking the news, you're giving out the message that your phone is more interesting than