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THE OPRAH
MAGAZINE

The comforts of **sex**

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to look at pleasure**

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Looking for Love?



Ah, the ambivalence: In our poll, 50 percent of you said casual sex is worth it; 50 percent said it's not.

Uh-Uh

For meaningful sex? Not tonight, thanks. Three out of four of you are having—or have had—casual, no-strings sex. Is this progress, sisters—or are we kidding ourselves?

MORE THAN 40 YEARS AGO, THE PILL promised to banish the fear of unwanted pregnancy, to free women to acknowledge their right to a healthy sexual appetite, and to do away with the double standard (he's a stud; she's a slut). What's really happened since?

How do American women feel about casual sex? Are we having it, and, if so, are we enjoying it or regretting it? Are we hardwired to bond, or can we be as detached as the next guy?

To find out, we asked Alexa Joy Sherman, coauthor of *The Happy*

Hook-up: A Single Girl's Guide to Casual Sex (Ten Speed Press), due out this month, to conduct an online poll at oprah.com based on the survey she did for her book; nearly 3,000 of you took part. We also sent reporters to talk to the experts—researchers, sex therapists, and the women on the front lines of love.

In the following pages, you'll meet women who genuinely revel in a no-strings romp, some (mostly young) who prefer casual sex because they consider it protection from a broken heart, and others (a bit older) who respect themselves in the morning but feel a tickle of ambivalence about whether to wait for Mr. Right or delight themselves with Mr. Right Now.

The Stats Who's doing it and why—and how do you feel about yourself in the morning? ALEXA JOY SHERMAN reports.

74% of you have had casual sex.

"He's not going to buy the cow if he's getting the milk for free." Remember that one? Today's adage might be more along the lines of "Why buy the bull just for a little sport?" Almost three quarters of the oprah.com respondents (average age, 31) say they've had casual sex—i.e., sex for the sheer sake of sex, with no serious relationship, no strings attached—with at least one person. Of those, 12 percent have had casual sex with six to ten people, and 15 percent with 11 or more.

42% find sex buddies through friends or mutual acquaintances.

The next most common way to meet one is at a bar or club (19 percent)—only 1 percent hook up through a dating service. About a quarter of you say you lost your virginity to a casual lover, and these exchanges can be quick—4 percent have gone from "hi" to "hot and heavy" in less than an hour. More of you (55 percent) prefer to romp and run than spend the night after getting it on with a casual partner. And group sex (three or more)? Fourteen percent claim at least one experience. A sobering note: While 49 percent of you always use condoms, 36 percent employ them only

sometimes, and 11 percent never do—which means way too many of us are putting ourselves at risk of potentially fatal diseases like AIDS.

9% do it for an ego boost.

Women have casual sex for a variety of reasons, the most common of which is pure pleasure (25 percent), followed by adventure (18 percent), the ego boost, and stress relief (8 percent). Many of you say such physical encounters offer a dose of companionship and intimacy, albeit fleeting, during long spells of being single. Some prefer the freedom of no-strings-attached sex to the effort of maintaining a marriage or boyfriend-girlfriend arrangement. As Jackie, a 35-year-old social worker from Portland, Oregon, puts it: "Frankly, many folks are in relationships that are more work than reward, and that is not enticing to me. I am pretty happy with my life as a single woman, and sometimes casual physical contact is all I need to scratch my itch for that connection." Then again, 5 percent of our respondents say they sleep with a man to see if he's worth getting to know; 46 percent have developed committed relationships from what started out as one-night stands.

Is it worth it? Yes (about 50 percent) and no (the other 50). How women feel after the fact is—no surprise—conflicted. Around half of you say that compared to sex in a committed relationship, a fling is "more exciting," "wonderfully freeing," or "second-best to a relationship but better than nothing." The other half say, "It's not worth it." Forty-one percent typically feel "guilty," "lonely," "depressed," "empty," or "worse about myself" post-encounter. The key to having a good experience, some of you explain, is keeping your emotional distance. "If you can't remain detached, it will ruin you," writes Adrienne Terrazas, 40, an executive assistant from Orange County, California. "But then, maybe the fact that you can remain detached means you're already ruined; who knows?" Which brings us to the \$25,000 question: Can women really hook up without getting hooked?

Only 25% of you are capable of truly casual sex.

When we inquired whether you could have a one-night stand without becoming even somewhat attached, 25 percent said definitively yes, and 23 percent said absolutely not. In a similar question asking which statement best describes how you feel afterward, 29 ▶

percent chose “Try as I might to be detached, sex is never really casual for me. I always feel something more”; 33 percent selected “I’ve been had.” But 22 percent said you walk away feeling “empowered, sexy, and/or happy to be single.”

80% have regrets. Even among the empowered, in the light of day, after clothes have been collected and phone numbers politely swapped (or not) a whopping 80 percent of you wish you hadn’t done it—sometimes, if not always.

What causes such remorse? Alcohol, for one: Twelve percent of you are never sober when you end up in bed with a casual partner; 35 percent report that drinking can be a factor. Expectations may also be unrealistic. Sixty-three percent of you confessed you generally hope to see, or have contact with, a one-night-stand guy again—and 50 percent of you rated your best casual sex experiences as those involving a friend or regular partner rather than a one-hit wonder (only 11 percent). Another clue to what women are really looking for: Respondents would rather have a fling with someone who is “sensitive” (37 percent) than “hunky” (16 percent). And as

for requirements, 46 percent said you must like him as a person before going to bed versus 9 percent who demand that the candidate be handsome.

And then there’s the double standard that grips the culture with amazing stubbornness: A woman playing the field is “loose,” if not a “slut,” while a man about town is a “stud.” Perhaps remorse might not be so pervasive if women weren’t second-guessing themselves or wondering about others’ perceptions of them. Carmine, 21, a student from Irvine, California, who thoroughly enjoys casual sex, says, “Afterward I am regretful—not because I feel used but because I feel stigmatized.”

48% have become less accepting of casual sex and only 21 percent have become more accepting of it over time (31 percent of you said your views have remained consistent). Like all the survey results, this one rang true for *O*’s field reporters, who reveal their findings on the following pages. “I’ve had tons of sex,” a 44-year-old banker told our Cynthia Gorney, who talked turkey with members of a singles’ service called Table For Six in San Francisco. “But now I don’t know—

my needs and desires are different, and when I have sex with men, I usually get very wrapped up in them. So when they have casual sex with other women, I get jealous and possessive.”

And such disenchantment can start young. Just-graduated Yale sex columnist Natalie Krinsky reports, “One friend told me, ‘By the time we get used to the notion of casual sex, it’s junior year. And by then, we’re old news—there’s a whole new crop of freshmen that have yet to become jaded and 15 pounds heavier.’” Her girlfriends could have forgone the sex altogether, as “it was only good for the ‘drama, drama, drama,’ or severe loss of appetite—which actually helped with those pesky pounds.”

What can one make of the survey’s findings? Depending on where a woman is—geographically, in society, in her life—her attitude about casual sex varies and often shifts over time. So if you feel more Samantha Jones (“Love be damned; I just want action”) than prairie vole (one time and you’re a lifer), if you have casual sex once, often, or never, if you go from loving it to hating it and then back to loving it again, take comfort. You’re in great company. ●

Sex by the Numbers

A few random facts that may come in handy one day.

(Caution: Take these numbers with a grain of salt—when it comes to sex, people tend to flirt with the truth.)

Average number of sex partners an American woman will have in her lifetime: 6.

Average age at which women lose their virginity: 17.

Percentage of women who have sex two or three times a week: 31.

Percentage who have sex once a week or less: 61.

Percentage of wives who admit to cheating on a spouse: 15.

Percentage of women ages

18 and older who have gone without sex for a year: 21.

Percentage of men who say their female partners always have an orgasm during sex: 44.

Percentage of women who actually do: 29.

Most likely meeting place for two people who end up having sex within a month: a bar.

The locale least likely to spark such a result: school.

Percentage of men who enjoy getting oral sex: 45.

Percentage of women who love to give it to them: 17.

Percentage of men who find performing oral sex “very appealing”: 34.

Percentage of women who say the same about receiving it: 29.

The amount a phone sex operator can earn per call: \$1 a minute.

The average amount a marriage and family therapist earns per session: \$1 to \$1.50 a minute.

Salary the average porn star makes a year: \$100,000.

Number of porn stars who tested positive for HIV during an industry-wide AIDS scare in April and May: 5.

Dollars spent last year by the National Institutes of Health on contraception and reproduction research: \$330,000,000.

Dollars consumers spent last year on Viagra: \$1.14 billion.

Percentage of women who use erotic materials to get in the mood: 16.

The number one factor women (ages 45 and older) say would improve their sexual satisfaction: less stress. —Naomi Barr

Sources: “American Sexual Behavior: Trends, Socio-Demographic Differences and Risk Behavior” (National Opinion Research Center); *The Social Organization of Sexuality*; *Journal of Sex Research* (February 2001); American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy; Adult Video News; NIH; IMS Health; AARP/Modern Maturity Sexuality Study.