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Sexual Functioning Among Adults with Chronic Pain: Prevalence and Association with Pain-Related Outcomes

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Abstract

Background: Prior research indicates that sexual functioning and chronic pain commonly coexist and impact each other; however, there are limitations in current research as to the prevalence and severity of sexual dysfunction in patients with chronic pain.

Method: This study used detailed measures across multiple domains of sexual functioning to describe the prevalence and correlates of self-reported sexual functioning among individuals with chronic pain presenting for treatment at a multidisciplinary pain management center (N = 247). Domains included sexual interest, satisfaction with sexual functioning, vaginal lubrication, vaginal discomfort, and erectile function. Individuals with and without sexual dysfunction were compared on pain-related outcome variables.

Results: Results from this study showed a high prevalence of sexual dysfunction in populations with chronic pain and a positive association between sexual problems and pain severity and psychological concerns. Sex differences were noted, with female participants exhibiting significantly lower sexual satisfaction associated with higher levels of pain, pain-related life interference, depression, and anxiety, whereas these relationships were not significant for male participants.

Conclusion: Findings demonstrated that patients with chronic pain experience significant sexual dysfunction, including lack of interest in sexual activity and low satisfaction with their sex lives. Compared with patients without sexual dysfunction, patients with sexual dysfunction reported higher average pain levels and higher depressive symptoms, along with greater anxiety in patients with at least one area of sexual dysfunction. Adding to these findings are the pain-relevant correlates of sexual functioning domains and sex differences in these relationships, with women experiencing additional pain-related problems. Limitations and future research directions are discussed.

Keywords: Chronic Pain; Disparities, Gender; Sexual Function.

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