

Headline **In France, sex rules**
Date **26 Jul 2010**
MediaTitle **Daily Express (KK)**
Section **People & Events**
Journalist **N/A**
Frequency **Daily (EM)**
Circ / Read **30,557 / 97,836**

Language **English**
Page No **20**
Article Size **126 cm²**
Color **Black/white**
ADValue **260**
PRValue **779**



Ooh-la-la!

What could be more French than sex? More sex, as it turns out — especially if you happen to be a woman. Nearly 40 years after France's May 1968 revolution spawned the slogan "*pleasure without obstruction*," a new study finds that the French of both genders are engaging in more varied and frequent sex than ever before — and both earlier and later into life. Yet perhaps the most significant finding in the report is that French women have been playing serious sexual catch-up with their male counterparts since the last national sex survey in 1992.

According to the new 600-page "*Study of Sexuality in France*," commissioned by France's National Research Agency on AIDS, both the number of partners and diversity of sexual activity has significantly increased in France in the last decade. That's perhaps not surprising, given how much more sex there is in entertainment, on the internet, and in public discussion.

Less expected, however, is how thoroughly French women have closed the gap with men in terms of number of lovers, age of initiation, and variety of acts engaged in. In some measures, women have overtaken men for the first time. Only 3.5pc of women aged 18-35 years now say they are sexually abstinent, for example, versus 6.2pc for males of the same age. French women are engaging in sex from a younger age and more frequently than before, while 20pc of French men aged 18-24 years say they have no interest in sexual or romantic activity whatever.

The study, which surveyed more than 12,000 men and women between the ages of 18 and 69, reports the average age of first sexual intercourse to be 17.2 years for French men, and 17.6 for women — down from nearly 20 years among

females in 1996. (Comparable figures in the U.S. show average age for first intercourse as 17.3 years for males and 17.5 for women.)

The number of lifetime sexual partners is also on the rise: French women between the ages of 30 and 49 report an average 5.1 *amants* in their lives (compared to 4 in 1992 and 1.5 in 1970). Men of the same age group give considerably higher numbers — 12.9 partners today — but have changed little over those declared in 1992 (12.6) and 1970 (12.8).

Meanwhile, the percentage of people saying they'd had only one sexual partner in their lives has fallen from 43pc in 1992 for women to 34pc today, compared to 16pc among men (down from 18pc and 21pc in 1970 and 1992 respectively). Fully 90pc of women over the age of 50 say they remain sexually active, a big jump from 50pc in 1970.

The reason for flagging inhibitions? The study suggests the changes are largely due to increased accessibility to sexual content and the greater ease with which like-minded partners can find one another. The report finds that a staggering two out of every three kids in France has seen a porno film by the age of 11; 10pc of women and 13pc of men, meanwhile, said they'd use web sites to link up with prospective partners.

At younger ages, the percentage of women using the net to arrange dates surpasses that of males.

But all that increased friskiness doesn't necessarily mean the French are happier and better adjusted in the sack. Nearly 36pc of French women say they've suffered "*frequent or occasion*" sexual dysfunction in the past year of their lives, while just over 21pc of French men declared the same. That may explain why an estimated 500,000 patients in France visit sex counselors.

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