

# Why men may exaggerate number of sex partners - CNN

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 [cnn.com/2018/09/06/health/number-of-sex-partners-kerner/](https://www.cnn.com/2018/09/06/health/number-of-sex-partners-kerner/)

## Story highlights

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- Men claimed an average of 14 sexual partners over their lifetime, in one large study, while reported only seven partners
- Society's focus on "the number" may lead some to exaggerate – or decrease – their actual number out of embarrassment

Men, it turned out, claimed an average of 14 sexual partners over their lifetime, while women reported only seven. The people surveyed were between the ages of 16 and 74.

The investigators claim that such studies are an important part of human sexuality research and in assessing the risk of sexually transmitted infections. But my fellow sex therapists and I aren't so sure. Rather than focusing on one's number of partners, "We should be talking about what folks want for their future and what they've learned from past relationships," sex therapist Gracie Landes said.

I asked Landes and several of my other colleagues to weigh in on the continued fascination that the public – and media – seems to have with people's number of sexual partners.

The answer to this question appears to be a resounding "yes." Indeed, it's simple math: "Given that there are not significantly more women in the population than men, if men are reporting higher numbers and women are reporting lower numbers, many are reporting inflated or deflated numbers due to the tendency to answer questions in a way that they think they're supposed to," sex therapist Dulcinea Pitagora explained.

In fact, statistics released by the dating app Tinder show that men use a broader strategy, indicating their approval of someone's photo by swiping right on 46% of profiles, while women swipe right on only 14%. A study of raw data from Tinder also found that about 80% of female users are all competing for the same 20% of men.

"This seems to indicate that the number of sex partners would be especially skewed in the male population in favor of the more desirable men and that a majority of men are not having much success," sex therapist Michael Aaron said. "It's possible, then, that surveys such as this one, which find higher overall partners amongst men, may be indicative of men inflating their numbers, perhaps due to underlying shame."

## Why would someone inflate or deflate their actual number?

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As Aaron suggests, society's focus on the number of people someone has slept with may lead some to exaggerate – or decrease – their actual number out of embarrassment.

"Women might underreport out of fear of being judged negatively, while men might overreport in order to be looked at more favorably," sex therapist Rachel Needle said. "In other words, men who have a high number are considered studs, while women are often slut-shamed. In addition, women might round down so their partner feels more important and special."

Sex therapist Barbara Gold agreed. "I believe this is attributable to shame. It goes back to the gender myths that women aren't supposed to enjoy or expose their sexuality lest they be judged in a negative way, while whatever sexual shame men may carry, social norms not only allow them to be sexual creatures but expect them to be," she explained.

## Should you ask your partner their 'number' -- or tell them yours?

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Whether you choose to talk numbers with your partner is entirely up to you. "You should do whatever you're comfortable with," Gold said. "You might ask why they want to know and what the number represents to them and then decide if or how you want to respond."

"I find that more men ask this question of their female partners than vice versa," sex therapist Deborah Fox noted. "Although men make some meaning out of the number they receive, it's not really the question they want an answer to. They really want to know how they stack up to the previous partners, but that question requires way more nerve to ask. They want to know, 'Am I the best lover you've ever had?' but they're also unlikely to ask that question."

## What should couples be discussing instead?

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Rather than fixating on the number of people you or your partner have had sex with, I advise turning the conversation so that you're having an open discussion about your interests.

"Instead of discussing a number, you should be talking about what you know you enjoy sexually, what you're curious about and what you might want to explore in terms of sensations, types or scenarios, monogamy/non-monogamy and your top erotic triggers," sex therapist Sari Cooper said.

And while you should certainly ask about your partner's sexual health -- and get tested -- the number of sexual partners you've both had shouldn't affect the need to practice safe sex.

It can be tempting to focus on one's number of sexual partners, and studies like this one allow curious folks to compare themselves to others. But the fact is that there's no right or wrong number. What matters most is your relationship with your current partner and how you can both make that as satisfying as possible.

Ian Kerner is a licensed couples therapist, writer and contributor on the topic of sex for CNN.