

## THE INTIMATE LINK: DOCUMENTING CONTRACEPTIVE SEX ACCEPTABILITY AMONG NEW IUD AND IMPLANT USERS

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**Background:** Contraceptive products and services are associated with a range of health, social, and economic benefits for women. Acceptable, appealing contraceptive methods are thus critical to both reproductive and social health. However, the majority of women may be unsatisfied with their contraceptive method after several months of use, and this lack of acceptability leads to gaps in use and switching to less effective methods. These practices directly contribute to the persistently high rate of unintended pregnancies in the US.

A critically under-researched aspect of contraceptive acceptability is sexual acceptability, a concept developed by this research team to describe how birth control methods may affect women's sexual experiences. In contrast, research on men's use of male condoms demonstrates that the sexual acceptability of this method can influence men's uptake and use. There is preliminary evidence that sexual acceptability shapes women's contraceptive practices as well. However, larger-scale studies of contraceptives' sexual acceptability are needed—especially for long-acting reversible contraception (LARC), the most effective but most underutilized methods of contraception currently available.

Two major measurement gaps also hinder the research to date. First, most studies are cross-sectional, which prevents evaluating sexual experiences over time. Second, most research takes a solely physiologic approach to sexual acceptability, primarily through the Female Sexual Function Index (FSFI). Physiologic sexual functions such as lubrication and orgasm represent only one aspect of sexual acceptability. Data from this research team reveal other key facets, including psychological factors such as sexual disinhibition and surrender, sexual aspects of side effects such as bleeding and cramping, and women's perceptions of whether their methods affect sexuality.

**Objectives and Methods:** Our ultimate goals are to help match women with methods they will like and use over time, thereby fully realizing the health and social benefits of contraception. The objective of this proposal was to refine a novel approach to how we measure and evaluate contraception's sexual acceptability among 188 new LARC users across three time periods (baseline, 1 month, and 3 months). We recruited 49 new-start copper IUD users, 79 levonorgestrel IUD users, and 60 contraceptive implants users from Planned Parenthood clinics in Salt Lake City, Utah. We assessed a robust variety of sexual acceptability outcomes.

**Results:** Although 74% of women said method effectiveness is important to them in choosing a method, almost as many said it was important that a method doesn't interrupt sex (69%) and doesn't reduce libido (67%). After both 1 and 3 months of use, new LARC users did not report sexual functioning or sexual satisfaction scores that differed significantly from baseline. However, participants were significantly more likely to report subjective improvements to their sexual lives. At 1 month, 38% of women indicated their new method had improved their sex life in the last four weeks, compared to 13% reporting their method had made their sex life worse ( $\chi^2 p < 0.05$ ). By 3 months, 40% of women reported improvements. Sexual detractions were largely accounted for by reports of increased menstrual bleeding and cramping, particularly among copper IUD users.

In summary, findings suggest that 1) sexual criteria may be more important to women in contraceptive decision-making than previously examined, 2) women's perceptions of whether their method is affecting their sexuality may be important than classic measures of sexual functioning, 3) IUDs and implants show potential for improving sexuality by way of enhancing women's sense of security against unintended pregnancy, and 4) increases in menstrual bleeding and cramping were associated with women's sexual dislike of a method.

This project catalyzes a patient-centered approach to contraception that has the potential to improve women's experiences with their methods. Research from this program could ultimately be used to help match women with the method(s) they will find the most sexually acceptable—methods they will like and use—thereby helping women fully realize the social, economic, and health benefits of contraception.