



# SEX, ROMANCE, AND THE NEW DAD

From hormonal shifts to marital strains, first-time fatherhood can be full of surprises. We give you an inside look at what men experience and expert advice on easing the way.



## Reality Check



Aaron and Brenda Walker of Oakton, VA, had full lives before their son was born in March 2002. They both worked. Aaron played rugby. They traveled extensively across the western U.S. and Europe. They enjoyed each other completely, says Aaron, 28. "We met each other's needs on a physical and emotional basis. We had a thriving sex life," he says. "It was as if we knew exactly what the other one was thinking before we ever said a word."

Three months into Brenda's pregnancy, however, something changed. The couple started spending less time together. Sex became infrequent, then nonexistent. Aaron says that the lack of physical contact resulted from a combination of Brenda, 30, feeling overweight as well as his own emotional issues.

"As the pregnancy progressed, she thought I found her completely unattractive and that I didn't want to spend time with her sexually," he says. "I blame myself too. I come from a family of all boys and I was the baby. I was used to being the center of Brenda's attention. When she got pregnant, we had to redefine

our relationship because she was focusing on her own needs. I know it may have been a selfish response on my part, but at the time I figured it wasn't worth the energy to try and be intimate."

The Walkers' situation is more common than most people realize, say experts. And the impact on a marriage isn't necessarily limited to the pregnancy phase. Recent research from Washington State University in Vancouver found that up to 50% of new dads report feelings of depression during the first week after their baby's birth.

Symptoms of postpartum depression for men tend to be similar to those for women. These include excessive fatigue, loss of interest in previously enjoyable activities, impaired social relationships, and change in appetite. Also, men may appear agitated,

while women with postpartum depression are typically listless.

Researchers say that as with women, previous bouts of the blues are a strong predictor of male postpartum depression. And there's another factor, says Elizabeth Soliday, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology at Washington State: how they coped with problems before becoming dads. "Men who tend to be very focused on solutions and less on dealing with emotions are at a higher risk," she says. "Not all problems in the postpartum period can be solved. There are some challenges that are going to require time and mutual emotional support to work through. This is when these men have difficulties."

Interestingly, the likelihood that a man will experience postpartum depression isn't affected by whether his partner goes through it, says Dr. Soliday. And although the majority of men overcome their depression within a few months, 10% to 15% of them exhibit symptoms that are more severe and last well after their baby's first birthday.

Most sexual problems stem from these emotional issues, but experts are now beginning to explore physical causes. A 2000 study at Memorial University in Newfoundland, Canada, found that men have varying levels of cortisol, prolactin, and testosterone before their babies are born that mimic—albeit less drastically—their partners' fluctuating hormone levels. ▶



Nick Ragone, 33, of Jersey City, NJ, can relate. He and his wife, Tyan, 32, welcomed their first child in October 2004. Nick says that after about the third month of the pregnancy he had no sex drive whatsoever. "I felt very affectionate and wanted to hold her and hug her, but I just wasn't sexually turned on," he says. "I almost felt like something hormonal was going on."

The Memorial University researchers also gauged postpartum hormone levels by playing tape recordings of crying babies for new fathers. The male sex hormone testosterone decreased by 33%. "Men who reported more concern for their children were the ones who experienced a bigger drop in testosterone," says Anne Storey, Ph.D., study co-author and professor of psychology at Memorial University. This hormonal change helps prime them for providing care for their young, she says: "We don't know whether the phenomenon is genetic or experiential, but we know it's definitely real."

A second study, conducted at Queen's University in Ontario, Canada, uncovered similar results. Investigators found that new dads had lower testosterone levels. They also had decreased cortisol, a hormone that's often linked to stress. Meanwhile, their concentration of estradiol, a female sex hormone, was higher. According to experts, this may deliver an extra dose of tenderness that helps in parenting.

But the same hormones that make a man a more nurturing and concerned father may also make him less interested in sex. Luckily, the drop in libido is usually temporary—typically lasting no longer than six months. But occasionally sexual problems snowball into larger issues that may linger. According to Carolyn Pape Cowan, Ph.D., an adjunct professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, lack of sex eventually leads to less intimacy overall in the marriage. "It's not a priority to fix everything by three months postpartum," she says. "But the longer couples go on finding they can't talk to each other openly or solve issues, the more that's going to affect their relationship."

## MY MOTHER, MY WIFE

Sometimes it's a woman's weight gain and body changes during pregnancy and afterward that precipitate problems in the bedroom. Edward Araya, 29, of Silver Spring, MD, felt very attracted to his wife, Andria, 27, during her pregnancy. Andria, however, wasn't initially interested in being touched, putting a strain on their relationship. "She was very uncomfortable," he says. "I really had to be more aware of her feelings and make her feel special by telling her all the time how beautiful she was and just being there to listen to her."

What's even more common, according to experts, is the reverse: A woman wants sex, but her partner turns her down, especially during the first and second trimesters. "It's a problem I see quite frequently," says Glade B. Curtis, M.D., an obstetrician-gynecologist based in Salt Lake City and the author of *Your Pregnancy for the Father-to-Be*. "Men are often worried about hurting their partner and the baby. Even if you tell them, 'You're not going to harm the baby or mom,' they don't always believe you. Some figure maybe it's better if they don't have sex."

Other men have trouble viewing their wives as sexual beings because they associate motherhood with their own moms, says Lisa Spiegel, co-founder of Soho Parenting, a counseling service in New York City that provides support and guidance to families and individuals. "Many men's ideas about what 'mother' is are so connected with their feelings about their own mothers," she says. "They almost have to turn their partners into someone else—someone purely maternal and nurturing. But that changes the way they interact with them both sexually and personally."

This is common, says Ruth Ehrenkranz, a New York City-based licensed clinical social worker and psychoanalyst: "A husband looks at his breastfeeding wife and may think, 'She's the mother, she's the breast. Those breasts used to be part of sexual enjoyment, but now she's using them to feed the baby.'" ➤



## DAD AS THIRD WHEEL

Mothers contribute to this dynamic too. "The new mom connects to her baby in an intense way," says Marion Solomon, Ph.D., senior extension faculty member at the University of California, Los Angeles, and the author of *Narcissism and Intimacy: Love and Marriage in an Age of Confusion*. "We call it primary maternal preoccupation. The infant is the only person in the world that the mother sees, and this can last for months."

Spiegel explains it this way: "For many couples, the separation begins with the baby in the belly. The man can't understand what's happening, whereas the woman is experiencing everything firsthand. Men often feel a little alienated by this." Our society doesn't help by paying plenty of attention to expectant moms—think baby showers and pregnancy spa treatments—and very little to the dad.

As the baby gets older, the woman turns her attention back to the husband. "But," says Dr. Solomon, "since he got left out by this disconnection, he might be hurt or angry." This happened to Aaron Walker. "There were moments when my wife was spending so much time with our little boy that I felt like I was a complete afterthought," he admits. "I just wanted her to focus on me. I'd tell her, 'The baby's sleeping, he's fine. Come be with me,' but it didn't always work. Yeah, you could definitely say I was feeling left out for around six or seven months."

Christopher Hollenback, 29, of Madison, WI, also had a rocky transition. His wife, Jaimie, 28, gave birth to their daughter in October. "Christopher would say to me, 'The baby loves you; you're the food,'" recounts Jaimie. "I know he was thinking, 'What do I bring to the table as a dad?'" While Christopher says he wasn't jealous that his wife was breastfeeding—he was proud that she could do this for their child—he did feel like a third wheel, especially because she was a stay-at-home mom. "To a certain degree, the one who's at home with the baby is going



to be bonding more," he says. "I couldn't help but feel like I missed out a bit."

Experts say that certain personality traits can predict who will struggle most. Men who thrive on attention before the baby is born and expect their wives to dote on them are more vulnerable. And those who have unresolved wounds from the past—inattentive parents, troubled relationships with women, or a history of strong sibling rivalry, for instance—are likely to be needy. "When their wives are focusing on the new baby the men are completely confused," says Dr. Solomon.

Added to that are the resentment and fear—either conscious or unconscious—related to the loss of self that may accompany new fatherhood. While his wife struggled with painful breastfeeding and lack of sleep, Christopher had to confront the fact that he gave up many aspects of what defined him as a person. He left a job that he loved for one that paid less because it required fewer hours in the office. He also reevaluated his personal commitments and ended up quitting his band and abandoning his dreams of playing drums professionally. "I had to choose between my family and a certain lifestyle," he says. "I know I made the right decision, but it was difficult."

Aaron Walker also made adjustments. "I had to confront my anxiety and make a conscious mental shift." Now their



marriage is stronger than ever: "It took months of us talking and working through things, but our relationship is on a higher level than it's ever been before."

It's hard to know which couples are destined for difficulties, says Dr. Cowan. But the good news is that, in general, marriages that are strong before a baby arrives tend to do well afterward too. And Dr. Cowan's research has uncovered some even more encouraging data: The couples with kids she studied had a divorce or separation rate of 20% after

five years, compared to 50% among those who remained childless during that same period. Perhaps parenthood tests a couple's mettle but makes their bond ultimately stronger. **B**

Karen J. BAKER writes about parenting, health, and personal finance. She lives with her husband and 18-month-old daughter on Long Island, NY.

**B** Is your relationship facing challenges since the birth of your baby? Get support from other new parents on our Sex & Marriage board at [www.child.com/community](http://www.child.com/community).

## MINDING YOUR MARRIAGE

What can you do to recharge your relationship during pregnancy and beyond? "Find time every day, even just 10 minutes, to connect," says Carolyn Pope Cowan, Ph.D., an adjunct professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley. "Talk about how your day went, how you're doing as a couple—anything except how the baby is and who's going to take the garbage out," she says. But be careful not to level accusations, such as "You're not looking after me" or "You're always with the baby." "The focus should be on your feelings and your longing for closeness," Dr. Cowan explains.

Aaron and Brenda Walker, of Oakton, VA, tried this method. "I was lucky she was willing to talk and say, 'I feel lonely.' Then I could admit I felt lonely too," he says. "And she could tell me she needed me to rub her feet. It really opened things up for us." If you don't communicate these needs, says Dr. Cowan, resentment can develop.

Yudit Jung, Ph.D., a psychoanalyst in Macon, GA, suggests that her new-parent clients start "dating" each other again. "Couples should try to have one evening a week without the baby and a romantic overmigher away every three months," she says. "You need that to be functioning adults and partners."

As you focus on each other, keep in mind that sex doesn't always equal intercourse, says Lou Paget, a Los

Angeles-based certified sex educator and the author of the new book *Hot Mama: The Ultimate Guide to Staying Sexy Throughout Your Pregnancy and the Months Beyond*. She also advises keeping the baby out of your bed. "Children are one of the best birth-control methods ever known to man," she says. "Once you've made it past the first few months, it's time to put the baby in her own room."

Also remember that neither of you should expect to go from parent to lover mode in two seconds. You'll need a transition period, so give yourselves some time alone to relax, perhaps with a long bath or shower, suggests Paget. (It goes without saying that men who make disparaging remarks about their partners' bodies will quickly find themselves leading a life of celibacy, she points out.)

If you're making every effort and one or both of you is expressing unhappiness, blaming the other person, or feeling criticized, that's when it might be time for you to consult a professional who specializes in relationship issues, says Dr. Cowan.

"We're not necessarily talking about long-term therapy," she says. "People have been having babies for generations, but couples have such high expectations of relationships these days that they can get disappointed and disillusioned quickly. It's much better to deal with it early to avoid problems that drag on."

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