



Googling America's Sex Life

Google knows my dress size and that I wear flats. It knows I do yoga, and it is always trying to sell me clothes to wear to class.

We've all been creeped out by the ads that pop up alongside our Google searches. It's like somebody at headquarters is assigned to read my mind.

But, it turns out, Google knows how much sex we are having, too. And very often it isn't good sex.

In an essay for The New York Times, which has probably topped Google searches for days, economist Seth Stephens-Davidowitz says Google knows what's going on behind our closed doors. Or at least what we say is going on.

Using Google search requests as evidence of what is on our minds, our top complaint seems to be that we are not having much sex at all. Searches for "sexless marriage" are three and a half times more common than searches for "unhappy marriage" and eight times more common than "loveless marriage."

Even singles aren't having all the sex they want. Mr. Stephens-Davidowitz found that there were five and a half times more complaints about an unmarried partner not wanting sex than an unmarried partner refusing to reply to texts.

Searching the Google searches, Mr. Stephens-Davidowitz concluded that we are having sex about 30 times a year, or once every 12 days. One reason, his search of searches suggested, is that men are extremely anxious about the size of their penises while women don't seem to care.

"For every search women make about a partner's phallus, men make roughly 170 searches about their own," he wrote. Most often, they are looking for ways to make it bigger.

(You have to laugh. One of the top questions is, "How big is my penis?" Men are asking that question of Google instead of reaching for a tape measure.)

Women used to be concerned that their rear ends were too big, but we are now searching for ways to make them bigger, the author reported. Not surprisingly, men still prefer big breasts.

Bill Albert, chief program officer and spokesman for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, has been studying sex for a couple of decades, and if he has learned one thing, it is that we are all still in middle school, trying to find out if we are normal, if we measure up to the next guy.

"Many adults are wondering the same thing when it comes to sex," he said. "That's at the heart of all these searches: 'Am I normal?'"

The Internet allows us to get information on sensitive topics like this without everybody knowing.

Well, that's what we thought, anyway.

"We can learn a lot about what people want to know through Google searches," said Mr. Albert. "I am constantly surprised at the number of adults who don't know stuff."

National Campaign research shows that an overwhelming majority of teens and adults say they have all the information they need to avoid an unwanted pregnancy. "Yet four in 10 freely admit they know little or nothing about birth control pills."

People know less about relationships and sex and contraception than they know which animals have the cutest babies. If Googling can reduce that ignorance, hallelujah.

"Sex is a topic we all fancy ourselves expert in," said Mr. Albert. "It is hard to say, 'Sorry, I don't know anything about sex. Can you help me?'"

But that's not what's happening, according to Mr. Stephens-Davidowitz. Our Google searches reveal instead how incredibly insecure we are about our bodies and how our partners might be judging them.

Frankly, those anxieties are not relieved now that I know somebody is keeping track of all those sex searches.