

## Sexual behaviors in Mexican youth during COVID-19 confinement

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**Introduction:** Confinement due to the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) caused changes in sexual and reproductive health care, as well as in the sexual behaviors of the population. **Objective:** Describe the sexual behaviors of young Mexicans during COVID-19 confinement. **Methodology:** Cross-sectional descriptive design, where the sample consisted of 613 Mexican young people ranging from 18 to 28 years of age; sampling was non-probabilistic by convenience, an online survey was conducted. A data questionnaire and a sexual behavior questionnaire adapted for this study were applied. Data analysis was performed with the SPSS version 25 statistical package, using descriptive and inferential statistics such as Student's t-test. **Results:** The main behaviors found during coronavirus confinement were the following: Masturbation 49.9%, viewing pornography 43.2%, sexting 33.9%, cybersex 17.9% and oral, vaginal, and/or anal sex 46.8%. **Conclusions:** Youth sexual behavior changed during confinement compared to the former year. These findings provide evidence for the implementation of nursing interventions for the promotion of sexual health during health crisis situations such as COVID-19.

**Keywords:** Sexual behavior; coronavirus infections; involuntary confinement; young adult (DeCS).

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## Comportamentos sexuais em jovens mexicanos durante o confinamento COVID-19

### ABSTRATO

**Introdução:** O confinamento devido à pandemia do coronavírus (COVID-19) causou mudanças nos cuidados com a saúde sexual e reprodutiva, bem como nos comportamentos sexuais da população.

**Objetivo:** Descrever os comportamentos sexuais de jovens mexicanos durante o confinamento COVID-19. **Metodologia:** Delimitação transversal descritiva, onde a amostra foi composta por 613 jovens mexicanos de 18 a 28 anos; a amostragem era não probabilística por conveniência, uma pesquisa online foi conduzida. Foi aplicado um questionário de dados e um questionário de comportamento sexual adaptado para este estudo. A análise dos dados foi realizada como o pacote estatístico SPSS versão 25, utilizando estatística descritiva e inferencial, como o teste t de Student.

**Resultados:** Os principais comportamentos encontrados durante o confinamento do coronavírus foram: Masturbação 49,9%, ver pornografia 43,2%, sexting 33,9%, cibersexo 17,9%, e sexo oral, vaginal e/ou anal 46,8%. **Conclusões:** O comportamento sexual dos jovens mudou durante o confinamento em comparação com o ano anterior. Esses achados fornecem evidências para a implementação de intervenções de enfermagem para a promoção da saúde sexual durante situações de crise de saúde, como o COVID-19.

**Palavras-chave:** Comportamento sexual; infecções por coronavírus; confinamento involuntário; jovem adulto (DeCS).

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## INTRODUCTION

The SARS-Cov-2 coronavirus that causes the COVID-19 disease was first reported in Wuhan China on December 31, 2019, but it was until March 11, 2020, that the Sars-Cov-2 pandemic was declared <sup>(1, 2)</sup>. This event brought a series of social, economic, and health difficulties to people <sup>(3)</sup>. As part of the mitigation of the pandemic, health authorities worldwide, including Mexico, established social distancing as a measure to prevent COVID-19, which was considered one of the most effective strategies, since it is an easily transmitted and spreading disease, where close contact between people including sexual relations and face-to-face encounters were restricted; thus, sexual behavior was modified and new ways of having sexual pleasure arose <sup>(4-7)</sup>.

Several research studies have documented the sexual behavior during confinement in the adult population, where a reduction in the frequency of sexual intercourse was observed, but masturbation increased <sup>(7, 8)</sup>. Additionally, different ways of satisfying their sexual desires were incorporated, such as cybersex, that is, the use of the Internet for sexual purposes, such as pornography and sexting <sup>(7, 9)</sup>. It should be noted that cybersex is associated to risky sexual behaviors in young people such as oral sex, sex with casual partners, and sex under the influence of alcohol or other drugs <sup>(10)</sup>.

During the pandemic, it was found that those who had sex under the influence of drugs had a greater number of casual partners per month and a greater probability of having anal sex without a condom, and those who drank alcoholic drinks were more sexually active <sup>(11, 12)</sup>. Such behaviors are risk factors for acquiring sexually transmitted infections, in addition to increasing the risk of Sars-Cov-2 transmission through oral/anal contact <sup>(13, 14)</sup>.

To reduce the risk of infection and promote the sexual well-being of people during the pandemic, some recommendations

were provided, including: a) practicing masturbation, b) having sexual activity through digital platforms, and c) having sexual relations with partners with whom they were living during the period of confinement due to coronavirus <sup>(15)</sup>. Coca et al. conducted a study in young people aged 18 to 23 years, who did not respect the rule of social distancing in order to have sexual intercourse <sup>(16)</sup>.

It is worth mentioning that there is little evidence related to the sexual behavior shown by young people during the pandemic; therefore, it was urged through the media to document the impact of aspects related to sexual health, such as sexual behavior <sup>(17)</sup>, so the question about the various sexual behaviors that Mexican young people have been showing during the confinement by COVID-19 emerged.

### **Objective**

Describe the sexual behavior of Mexican youth aged 18 to 28 years during COVID-19 confinement.

## METHODOLOGY

### **Study design**

The study design was descriptive and cross-sectional. The population consisted of young people from Mexico, who reside in the northern states of the country (Chihuahua, Saltillo, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas), northwestern states (Baja California, Sinaloa, and Sonora), central north states (Jalisco, Aguascalientes, Guanajuato, San Luis Potosí, Querétaro, and Zacatecas), central states (Puebla, Mexico, and Tlaxcala), and southern states (Chiapas, Campeche, Tabasco, Veracruz, Oaxaca, and Yucatán); 613 participants were included. The sample was estimated for a 99% confidence interval and a margin of error of 5.3%. Only young people between 18 and 28 years of age were included. The sampling was non-probabilistic by convenience. The

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following were considered as elimination criteria: 1) failure to give consent to participate in the study, and 2) participants who left the questionnaires with incomplete answers.

### **Instruments**

The measurements consisted of the application of an online questionnaire, which consisted of two sections, namely, 1) personal data questionnaire in which information such as state of origin, sex, age, marital status, schooling, and occupation was collected; 2) the Questionnaire of sexual behaviors of young people adapted for the purposes of this study, which was based on the Sexual Risk Behavior Scale, validated in Spanish in young adolescents<sup>(18)</sup>; the questionnaire consisted of 9 items scored with a dichotomous scale. Some examples of items are "Have you practiced sexting during the COVID-19 contingency period?"; "Have you had oral, vaginal, and/or anal intercourse during the COVID-19 contingency period?"; "since the beginning of the COVID-19 contingency period, how many times have you or your partner used a condom?"; "since the beginning of the COVID-19 contingency period, where did you get the condoms?"; etc.

### **Study ethics**

This study was subject to the regulations set forth in the General Health Act Involving Human Subjects and was approved by the Ethics and Research Committee of the School Faculty of Nursing and Nutrition of the UACH: Registration Number SIP-CI/2020/04.

### **Procedure**

Once the corresponding permits were issued, online data collection began. The informed consent and the instruments were captured and were available on the Google Forms platform, the link that allowed access to them was disseminated on Facebook from June 22 to July 08, 2020, and in this period of time it was shared by this network, until the sample

was collected; 625 surveys were obtained, of which only 613 were included in the analysis, since 12 surveys were removed because their consent to participate in the study was not provided and showed incomplete answers.

The informed consent included information about the study, such as the objective, protection of the participant's anonymity, as well as the confidentiality of the data and the possible risks of participating in the research; finally, the researcher's contact information was included, and if the participant agreed, he/she selected "I accept", then he/she entered the socio-demographic data card and to the questionnaire on sexual behaviors. Finally, the participant had to choose "send" the questionnaire so that the participant's data could be available to the researchers. It is worth mentioning that no personal ID data or any type of information from the participant was requested to guarantee anonymity.

### **Statistical analysis**

Data analysis was performed using the SPSS version 25 statistical package. To determine the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants, frequencies and percentages were used to describe the categorical variables of the study. Measures of central tendency and dispersion were used for the numerical variables. As an additional analysis, the Student *t*-test for independent tests was used to observe the differences between sexually active men and women during COVID-19 confinement.

## **RESULTS**

A total of 613 young people from different regions of the country participated. The majority was from the North of Mexico (53.5%), followed by the southern region (23%); the mean age of the participants was 22 years (*SD*= 2.85). It was observed that 75.2% of them were females and 54.8% were students; it seemed that 90.9% of them had a middle socio-economic level; 82.9% of them were single and 85.3% mentioned not having

children. Table 1 shows the sociodemographic data of the participants.

Table 1. Sociodemographic characteristics of young Mexican people

Variable	<i>f</i>	%
Region of the country of origin		
North	328	53.5
North West	98	16.0
Central	20	3.3
Northern Central	26	4.2
South	141	23.0
Participant's sex		
Male	152	24.8
Female	461	75.2
Activity/Occupation		
Works	119	19.4
Studies	336	54.8
Work and studies	126	20.6
Neither works nor studies	32	5.2
Perceived socio-economic level		
High	7	1.1
Middle	557	90.9
Low	49	8.0
Marital status		
Single	508	82.9
Married	53	8.6
Common-law marriage	48	7.8

Divorced	4	0.7
Children		
Yes	90	14.7
No	523	85.3
Sexual preferences		
Straight	534	87.1
Homosexual	32	5.2
Bisexual	47	7.7
Current couple		
Yes	379	61.8
No	234	38.2

Source: data card, *f* = frequency, % = percentage, *n* = 613

Table 2 shows the frequencies and percentages of the sexual behaviors that young people have engaged in at some time in their lives, in the last year, and during the COVID-19

contingency, among which the following stand out: masturbation (49.9%), having oral, vaginal, and/or anal sex (46.8%), watching pornography (43.2%), sexting (33.9%), and cybersex (17.9%).

Table 2. Sexual behaviors in Mexican young adults during confinement due to COVID-19.

Variable	Yes		No	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Masturbation				
Sometime in life	440	71.8	173	28.2
In the last year	400	65.3	213	34.7
During COVID-19 confinement	306	49.9	307	50.1
Viewing pornography				
Sometime in life	449	73.2	164	26.8
In the last year	338	55.1	275	44.9

During COVID-19 confinement	264	43.2	349	56.9
<b>Sexting</b>				
Sometime in life	346	56.4	267	43.6
In the last year	268	43.7	345	56.3
During COVID-19 confinement	208	33.9	405	66.1
<b>Cybersex</b>				
During COVID-19 confinement	106	17.3	507	82.7
<b>Sex</b>				
Sometime in life	511	83.4	102	16.6
During COVID-19 confinement	287	46.8	326	53.2

Source: Sexual behaviors survey, *f* = frequency, % = percentage, *n* = 613.

Fuente: Cuestionario de conductas sexuales, *f* = frecuencia, % = porcentaje, *n* = 613

Of the 287 young adults who had sex during COVID-19 confinement, only 283 reported some of the sexual behaviors. Table 3 shows condom use among young adults who

had sex during COVID-19 confinement, with an average of 4.16 times (*SD*= 8.26).

Table 3. Sexual behaviors of young adults who have had sex during confinement by COVID-19

Variable	<i>n</i>	$\bar{X}$	Median	Mode	<i>SD</i>	Min. Value	Max. Value
Number of people you have had sex with	283	1.41	1	1	4.12	1	70
Number of times you had sex	283	10.86	5	1	14.29	1	100
Number of times you have used condom	283	4.16	1	0	8.26	0	59

Source: Sexual behaviors survey,  $\bar{X}$  = mean, *SD*=standard deviation, Min. val=minimum value, Max. val=maximum value; *n*=283.

Subsequently, when comparing the differences between men and women regarding the number of people they have had sex with ( $t(285) = -.09, p = 0.97$ ), number of times they have had sex ( $t(67.5) = 1.56, p = 0.12$ ), and number of times they have used condom ( $t(67.1) = 1.05, p = 0.29$ ), no significant differences were found.

It was found that 87.6% (248) of the young people mentioned having sexual

relations with a stable partner, 8.8% (25) with occasional partners, and 3.5% (10) with both of them. Table 4 describes frequencies and percentages of contraceptive methods used by young people who had sexual relations during COVID-19 confinement; 84.5% never had difficulty accessing contraceptive methods, in contrast to 2.5% who always had difficulty.

Table 4. Contraceptive methods used by young people who have had sex during confinement by COVID-19

Variable	<i>f</i>	%
Difficulty in accessing contraceptive methods		
Always	7	2.5
Usually	5	1.8
Some times	32	11.3
Never	239	84.5
Source of condoms		
Hospital-health center	25	8.8
Pharmacy-Doctor's office	90	31.8
Supermarkets	38	13.4
On-line stores	1	.4
Home	25	8.8
Did not use condom	104	36.7
Use of contraceptive methods, excluding condoms		
Natural methods	73	25.8
Chemical-hormonal methods	53	18.7
IUD	18	6.4
Permanent methods	1	0.4
Not applicable	138	48.8



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Source: Sexual behaviors survey f = frequency, % = percentage, n = 283.

The place from which condoms were obtained in this period of time was the pharmacy or the doctor's office (31.8%). However, 36.7% reported not using condoms when they had sex, and 48.8% reported not using contraceptive methods other than condoms. The most commonly used contraceptive method, excluding condoms, was natural methods (25.8%).

## DISCUSSION

The present research showed the sexual behavior of young people from different states of the country (mostly from the North and northwest) during the COVID-19 contingency. In terms of socio-demographic characteristics, most of the participants were female students in higher education, single, without children and with a partner. A similar study addressed sexual behavior in young people during the pandemic in China, with the difference that most of the participants were male<sup>(20)</sup>.

In accordance with the general objective, which was to describe the sexual behavior of young Mexican people aged 18 to 28 years of age during COVID-19 confinement, the results showed a reduction in the frequency with which they engaged in sexual behaviors, specifically masturbation, pornography, and sexting. The findings are interesting given that, due to confinement and social restrictions, it would be expected that these practices would increase since they do not involve direct contact. It has been documented that when opportunities for direct sex reduce, people often turn to the Internet for individual and online activities to satisfy their sexual needs, such as masturbation<sup>(21)</sup>.

Regarding pornography consumption, one study reported an increase in this behavior during the peak of confinement. This aspect was attributed to the presence of anxiety and negative moods in the individual caused by confinement, which generated an uncontrolled consumption of pornography, which is considered as a sexualized adaptation behavior

<sup>(22)</sup>. However, this finding is not consistent with the results of this research.

In relation to sexting, given that it is considered a growing and more frequent practice in the young adult population<sup>(23)</sup>, an increase would be expected during COVID-19 confinement; however, this study found a reduction in this practice. Thus, there is evidence that sexting represented a temporary coping strategy at the beginning of the pandemic<sup>(7)</sup>. Moreover, non-heterosexual young adults seemed to be more involved in sending and receiving information with sexual content than those who do not identify themselves as heterosexual<sup>(24)</sup>. It is worth mentioning that in this study most of the participants identified themselves as heterosexual.

The reduction in sexual practices mentioned above in the population studied is probably related to the lack of privacy in the confinement or to the reduction of the libido, which has been reported in other studies<sup>(20)</sup>. This finding matches that reported in a study that was performed in China, where participants reported a decrease in the number of sexual partners and in the frequency with which they had sexual intercourse<sup>(25)</sup>. Likewise, the Mexican Association for Sexual Health reported a reduction in the frequency of sexual intercourse<sup>(9)</sup>. The results of our research could be due to the reduction in perceived privacy; it should be noted that in Mexico, it is considered that the average age to become independent is around 30 years, and the average age of the sample that participated in this study was 22 years, more than 50% were students, and most of them were single. This information could indicate that the study participants live with their family, an aspect that could reinforce the previous approach, that is, the lack of their own physical space and privacy, which could have influenced the reduction in sexual practices during the contingency.

Another aspect that could explain the reduction in sexual practices in this study could be the presence of stress and anxiety resulting from prolonged isolation. Stress is one of the

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main causes of reduction of the sexual desire in both men and women since the levels of testosterone decrease and cortisol levels increase. In a study conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants reported more problems with the reduction of their sexual desire, problems with arousal and maintaining an erection, compared to the period before the pandemic began <sup>(9)</sup>.

Another result corresponds to the inconsistent use of condoms; this could be related to the fact that most of the sample studied reported having a stable partner and therefore, this provided a perception of security in order to accept having unprotected sex. However, this finding is relevant considering that in Mexico HIV/AIDS is mainly acquired between 15 and 29 years of age and that 30.7% of the total number of registered cases corresponds to the young population, with sexual transmission being the main means of infection in 96.3% of the cases <sup>(26)</sup>.

In addition, transmission of COVID-19 through vaginal or anal sex is still unknown; however, it is known that other coronaviruses are not easily spread through these means. According to the recommendations for safe sexual practice, it is important to avoid unprotected kissing and oral sex with individuals who are not close to each other or who live in another household <sup>(27)</sup>.

Regarding the use of contraceptive methods, excluding condom use, only 25.1% of young people used hormonal chemical methods or IUDs. These data are similar to those reported in a study in which it was noted that forms of birth control decreased significantly during the pandemic among participants (28). Another finding identified is that more than a quarter of young people use natural methods, which is of concern because there are no known figures on the efficacy of these methods, which could lead to the risk of unplanned and unintended pregnancies <sup>(29)</sup>.

In this research it was not possible to identify other factors that could have influenced the change of sexual behavior during confinement because it was descriptive, the instrument used was designed for the

purposes of the research, and its validity and reliability were not determined.

It is recommended to continue studies with populations under isolation such as men deprived of freedom; carry out more follow-up studies on new data regarding sexual behavior after the pandemic. Also, it is important to devise interventions to mitigate the harmful consequences of isolation resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and promote safe sexual practices.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The results of this study allowed us to identify that the sexual behavior of young Mexican aged 18 to 28 years of age changed during COVID-19 confinement. Specifically, it was seen a reduction in the frequency of sexual behaviors such as masturbation, sexting, viewing pornography, and sexual intercourse during COVID-19 confinement in young people compared to the last year. Despite being a descriptive study, the findings of the study could be useful in understanding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, physical social distancing, and sexual behavior in young adults. However, the change is not uniform and the results are not conclusive, compared to other research, so further study of these variables is suggested.

## **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interests in this manuscript.  
Los autores declaran que no existen conflictos de intereses en este manuscrito

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