



TEXAS UROLOGY

VASECTOMY WHAT IT MEANS TO A MAN AND HIS MARRIAGE

What happens to a couple when a husband takes total responsibility for birth control? How does their sex life change? Experts, and the couples themselves, explain when – and why – a vasectomy can make a good marriage better: By Joan Rattner Heilman

Only ten years ago few people could understand why anyone would choose to be sterilized. It seemed so extreme, so frightening, so final – “normal” people, it was thought, would never decide permanently to give up their ability to conceive a child. Vasectomies were especially unacceptable as a method of birth control, not only because most men assumed contraception was a woman’s responsibility, but also because there were so many myths and so much misinformation concerning the operation and its aftereffects.

But attitudes have changed dramatically. Today voluntary sterilization has become the single most popular form of contraception among couples married ten years or longer, and among wives who are 30 or older. And it’s second only to the Pill for couples 25 to 29 years old.

What is even more surprising about those statistics is that of the 1,000,000 people in this country who choose to be sterilized each year, almost half – 41% last year – are now men.

What were the questions that had to be answered, the fears that had to be overcome, before vasectomies could become an acceptable choice for these men? Why are so many men suddenly willing to take responsibility for preventing unwanted pregnancies? For years, both men and women believed that a vasectomy would adversely affect a male, emotionally and physiologically. Does it, in fact, interfere with sexual functioning and satisfaction? Does a man who has had a vasectomy feel less masculine, less potent? Or, as women have feared, does a vasectomy encourage a husband to “play around”?

To answer those questions, we interviewed dozens of experts – doctors, vasectomy counselors and sex therapists. And we talked to men and women across the country who have chosen this method of birth control.

SEX PROBLEMS: THE BIGGEST FEAR

“We hadn’t planned our third child or our fourth. We couldn’t afford another accident,” says Tom M of Redford Township, Michigan, explaining why he had a vasectomy a few months ago. “Ginny, my wife, didn’t like taking the Pill – it made her nervous. Her doctor didn’t advise the IUD. Neither of us was too comfortable with the diaphragm. So we started thinking about sterilization.”

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"It wasn't an easy decision to make. We discussed it for a long time – almost two years – before we came to the conclusion that it was right for us, and that I should be the one to have the operation," Tom continues. "I must admit, I was scared – afraid of the operation and, most of all, afraid that it would hurt me sexually. But then a friend of mine had the operation and he said it didn't change his sex life at all."

Tom now says, and Ginny agrees, that their sexual relationship is more relaxed and spontaneous now that they don't worry about birth control.

In most cases, sexual satisfaction and frequency increases for sterilized couples. This heightened enjoyment occurs, according to several studies, because of the sudden lack of concern about pregnancy and side effects of contraceptives. Planned Parenthood reports that decreased sexual desire or the inability to have an erection following the operation is rare – only four out of 1,000 men claim to have these problems, which the organization believes are emotional, not physiological, in origin. The fact is, there is no known way that vasectomy surgery itself can cause impotence.

"No one should expect a vasectomy to make any difference in his sexual functioning," says Dr. Ronald Murphy, a New York sex therapist. "A couple with problems, sexual or otherwise, isn't going to solve them this way, nor are new problems likely to arise simply because of the vasectomy."

The vast majority of the couples we spoke with were enthusiastic about the operation's effect on their sex lives. "I have two friends who got pregnant while they were on the Pill, and another who had an awful reaction to her IUD," says Linda W. of Denver, Colorado. "I never realized how much I worried about what contraceptive to use. My husband's vasectomy made a tremendous difference in our lives. I feel so free now."

"Whenever we made love, my wife was terrified that she'd get pregnant," says Hank P. of Seattle, Washington. "You wouldn't believe the precautions we took. It wasn't good for us. I began to feel guilty every time I went near her. But now there's no problem. She feels good, I feel good."

PAYOFF WANTED

Back when a vasectomy was an unusual operation, both men and women assumed that being infertile made a man feel less masculine. In 1969, Dr. David Rodgers, a psychologist at Ohio's Cleveland Clinic, conducted a study of men who had chosen to have a vasectomy. "We showed that sterility was sometimes a threat to masculinity. The chief result was that men had to prove to themselves, and to others, that they were as manly as ever," says Dr. Rodgers. "The men became more chauvinistic, more demanding. It was thought both men and women looked on the vasectomy as a sacrifice on the man's part, and so he wanted some payoff for having had it."

In Dr. Rodgers' opinion, if the same study were done today, it would undoubtedly produce different results. "The operation isn't unusual now, and neither is the concept that responsibility can be shared, so the vasectomized man doesn't have to feel like a martyr."

If it is a known fact that a vasectomy doesn't affect masculinity or sexuality, why are some men so afraid of the operation? Dr Helen Edey, a psychiatrist who for many years screened all vasectomy candidates at

the Margaret Sanger Center's New York clinic, says, "Some men are unconsciously anxious about their potency. Even if they know better, they feel that a vasectomy is a mutilation of their manhood."

"If a man believes, consciously or unconsciously, that a vasectomy will make him feel less masculine, then it will – it's a self-fulfilling prophecy," says Stephen D Mumford, formerly a vasectomy counselor for Planned Parenthood of Houston, and now at the International Fertility Research Bureau in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. In other words, if a man thinks he will feel less masculine after the operation, then that "prophecy" will come true. If he believes, for example that he can no longer be a good lover, he may develop sexual problems, even though there is no physiological reason for any changes in his sexual behavior. As Mumford points out, sex is "ninety percent in the head," so that if you think you will have sexual difficulties, you will have them.

"Some men – and they are very rare – can intellectually handle the idea of being sterile, but have a problem handling it emotionally. These men may have some psychological trauma for a few months after surgery," says Mumford.

If the wife of a sterilized man looks on the procedure as emasculating, that could also cause marital problems. Steve Keese, a vasectomy counselor at Charles Circle Clinic in Boston, says "A lot of women think men who have been 'fixed,' as several of them put it, lose their sexual interest and ability. They may even think their husband will get fat." The wife may pass her anxieties on to her husband, and her fears could become a reality.

DO MARRIAGES SUFFER

Marcia J. is 23 years old, has a five-year-old daughter, and definitely does not want another child. "For a long time, I was against George's idea to have a vasectomy. It seems so silly now, but I was afraid that he would start running around with other women. That's what I head would happen."

Does vasectomy make a man feel free to have extramarital affairs? Asked about this, every expert had the same opinion: The man who has always had affairs will keep on having them, and he will feel safer. The man who hasn't strayed won't start now. As one vasectomized man put it, "My conscience wasn't in that little piece of tube that was cut out."

A recent study by the Kaiser-Permanente Medical Center in Walnut Creek, California, showed that marriages in which one partner is sterilized appear to be more stable than those of couple using another method of contraception. In Contra Costa County, where the study was conducted, husbands who had vasectomies have fewer extramarital affairs and fewer divorces.

Some women believe that a vasectomy has had a favorable effect on their marriages because it proved to them that their husbands cared enough to take responsibility for preventing unwanted pregnancies. "I felt like it was a gift my husband presented to me. It was a beautiful thing," says a Connecticut minister's wife. "It makes a lot of men feel good to act responsibly; it makes them feel like men to take charge of the situation," says counselor Keese.

All the experts agreed that it is very important for the future of the relationship that the man does not feel pressured into having the operation. Dr. Ari Kiev, a psychiatrist at the Payne Whitney Psychiatric Clinic

in New York, says, "To have a vasectomy without psychological consultation is a mistake. If it's the man's idea, if he really wants to take the responsibility, things usually work out. But I've run into situations where the wife has made the decision. The guy who just goes along with what his wife wants is setting himself up for a lot of marital difficulties."

There is a consensus, too, that a vasectomy is not a good idea if the wife objects to it. In fact, if a wife objects, doctors and counselors advise against the operation. Once in a great while, doctors report, a man will have a vasectomy without informing his wife. Usually it's because the man's wife is against contraception but he believes they have more children than they can handle, or because a man's marriage is shaky and he decides another child wouldn't help.

The decision as to whether he or she should be sterilized can get complicated. Often, when the man decides to have a vasectomy, it's because it's simpler, safer and cheaper than a tubal ligation for a woman. Sometimes it's because the man is more certain than his partner that he wants no other children, or is less ambivalent about cutting off his biological ability to produce a child, according to Betty Gonzales. Studies have found that most men consider the operation for several years before going ahead, but almost all of the men who had a vasectomy say they don't regret it, that they would do so again.

IS IT DANGEROUS?

It isn't uncommon for a man to be afraid of the operation itself – the possibility of pain, the chance of an accident, a slip of the knife. "Look at all those malpractice suits – things can go wrong with any operation," says one man, a lawyer, explaining why he would never have a vasectomy.

"Nobody touches me?" says John J, a Connecticut businessman. "I know they say it's painless, but still, I don't want anybody messing around, cutting me there. I have a low threshold for pain, anyhow. My wife wanted me to get one, but no way, not me."

Actually, the vasectomy operation has been so refined that it is now considered much less complicated than a tonsillectomy, and just a little more uncomfortable than having a tooth pulled.

"Almost all men are nervous, especially about the injection of anesthesia," says Dr. Gerald Zelikovsky, a urologist who performs all the vasectomies for Planned Parenthood in New York city. "But it's really only a momentary discomfort, no worse than an injection in the buttocks."

In brief, what happens is this: The doctor, usually a urologist, injects a local anesthetic, then makes a small opening in the center of the scrotum. The sperm-carrying tube, called the vas deferens, is carefully lifted out, first on one side and on the other, then cut and closed so that no sperm can pass from the testicles into the semen. The incision is then closed.

As a result of the operation, sperm is no longer present in a man's semen. Although a man still produces sperm, it is blocked off and reabsorbed into his system. Also, his body continues to churn out the same male hormones it always has, and in the same amounts.

Following the operation, a man is usually advised to take it easy for a couple of days. He may ache, but aspirin and perhaps an ice pack are often all that is needed. Once in a while, a man has a more serious

side effect, such as an infection, swelling, discoloration, some pain, a blood clot near the incision or a build-up of fluid in the scrotum – all of which are easily treated.

Until the doctor is certain that no more sperm can be found in test samples of the man's semen, the couple must use another contraceptive. It takes a number of weeks for the sperm produced before the operation to be flushed out.

COST AND LEGALITY

Vasectomies cost anywhere from \$900 to \$1500, depending on the area of the country and whether it is performed in a clinic or by a private doctor in his office. They are now legal in every state, and there are no longer restrictions as to age or the number of children a man must already have.

What if a man changes his mind about wanting more children? A reversal is becoming increasingly possible, although doctors, as a rule, explain to their patients that the operation should be viewed as permanent.

Dr. Sherman Silber, a St. Louis urological surgeon, says that an effective reversal can be achieved in about seven out of ten cases using microsurgical techniques. During reversal surgery, the cut ends of the vas deferens are rejoined and opened so that once more the sperm can pass through into the semen. "Much depends on the time that has passed since the vasectomy, the way it was done, and the fertility status of the wife," says Dr. Silber, explaining why a reversal may not always be successful. "If the reversal surgery is done within a year or two, it can work out fine. But you can't assume that in your case a vasectomy will be reversible, so don't have a vasectomy unless you're certain you have all the children you want."

"Just because sperm is being ejaculated again doesn't mean you can get a woman pregnant," says Dr. Zelikovsky. "There are changes in the quantity and quality of sperm that has been obstructed all this time, as well as immunological changes in the body. In nine out of ten men, the tubes can be sutured together again so that they are open once more, but that won't necessarily do the job," he explains.

"Getting a reversal, assuming it would work, is very expensive," adds Betty Gonzales. "Besides, it's not done in every community in the country." Some couples she has counseled thought it would be a clever idea to have some pre-vasectomy sperm frozen for use later on, should they change their minds and want another child. "First, this means they are not ready to be sterilized and face the future without more children," says Gonzales. "And second, there is doubt that sperm can be successfully stored for more than a couple of years. Almost all the sperm banks have gone out of business."

There is another reason why a reversal doesn't always work: About half of those men who have had a vasectomy begin to produce sperm antibodies. After the reversal operation these antibodies attack and inactivate sperm, as if it were a foreign substance in the body, so that a many may remain infertile in spite of the reversal operation.

Sperm antibodies have also been accused of causing another problem. Researchers put monkeys on high cholesterol diets and found that they were more likely to develop atherosclerosis if their bodies were producing sperm antibodies. But the urologists we consulted and the Association for Voluntary

Sterilization do not think that these antibodies lead to the same problem in men. "The idea that this means vasectomies are dangerous to human beings has absolutely no basis in fact," says Dr. Joseph Davis, a prominent urologist.

The ongoing study at Kaiser-Permanente Medical Center in California suggests that a vasectomy may have a positive side effect for the wives of the men: The incidence of cancer of the cervix was lower among women whose partners had the operation. Further research is needed, however, before the results are considered conclusive.

Now that vasectomies are such an acceptable method of birth control, they will be the subject of a great many studies in the future. Now the experts we consulted believe that if the decision is based on full information and if the couple first receives counseling, a vasectomy can have only positive effects on a man and his marriage.

END

Note: The Association for Voluntary Sterilization, a nonprofit, educational organization dedicated to making voluntary sterilization available to all who choose it, has a free, nationwide referral service, and offers information and counseling. Their address is 708 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017.