

Original article

Does Penis Size Influence Sexual Behaviour of Men who Have Sex with Men?

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SUMMARY

Penis size is a major body image concern for the majority of men in western nations, while in gay culture the penis has become a body part linked to sexual attractiveness and viability. The aim of this study was to reveal influence of the perceived penis size on sexual behaviour, condom use, sexually transmitted infections and men's sexual positioning among men who have sex with men.

In this cross-sectional study, the data were collected from consecutive men who have sex with men who attended Counselling for Sexually Transmitted Diseases at the City Institute for Skin and Venereal Diseases in Belgrade, Serbia.

Out of 319 participants, 6.6% perceived their penis as "below average", 71.5% as "average", and 21.9% as "above average". In comparison with men with an average penis, men with below average penis were more frequently unsatisfied with their penis size ($p < 0.05$), more frequently lied to others about their penis size ($p < 0.001$) and took more frequently the passive sexual role ($p < 0.05$). Men with above average penis were more frequently satisfied with their penis size ($p < 0.001$), took more frequently the active sexual role ($p < 0.01$), they had more sexual partners ($p < 0.05$), more problems with a tight condom ($p < 0.001$) and more gonorrhoea/Chlamydia infections ($p < 0.001$) than men with an average penis.

Perception of one's penis size was associated with some aspects of sexual behaviour and the frequency of sexually transmitted diseases.

Key words: men who have sex with men, penis size, condom use, sexual behaviour, sexually transmitted infections

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INTRODUCTION

Penis size in its erect state is a symbol of power, masculinity, fertility and social status (1). Therefore, it is not surprising that for many men the size of their penis is an important issue (2). Saying that size does not matter is debatable. Considering the wide-spread belief that the penis is the focus of masculinity and enjoyment, its size is unsurprisingly carrying a lot of weight. Some men may shy away from situations in which they are required to appear naked as they perceive their penis to be too small to reveal, and wish to be considered for surgical lengthening or thickening procedures (3). Concerns over penile size and a desire for a longer penis are common in the male population. Penis size is a major body image concern for the majority of men in western nations, while in dominant gay culture the penis has become a body part linked to sexual attractiveness and viability (4). What is more, penis appearance and size may be a source of apprehension when using condoms. Researchers have argued that penis size can impact correct and consistent condom use as well as the transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (5, 6). Penile size can also influence self-labelling and anal sex roles preference among men who have sex with men. Men with above average penises were more dominant and more likely to identify as "top" - anal insertive, while men with below average penises were more submissive and more likely to identify as "bottom" - anal receptive (7-9). It is well known that receptive anal intercourse poses the highest risk for HIV infection.

The aim of our study was to reveal the influence of the perceived penis size on sexual behaviour, condom use, sexually transmitted infections and men's sexual positioning among men who have sex with men in Belgrade, Serbia.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of the City Institute for Skin and Venereal Diseases in Belgrade: Chairman of the ethics committee - Milan Bjekic; protocol number 02-1062/2; date of approval 17/9/2015. All patients have given their informed consent for participation in the research study.

In this cross-sectional study, the data were collected from consecutive men who have sex with men who attended Counselling for Sexually Transmitted Diseases at the City Institute for Skin and Venereal Diseases in Belgrade. This is the main institution for STD patients

with sexually transmitted diseases in Belgrade, with a counselling department, and it is friendly for vulnerable populations such as men who have sex with men.

The study was conducted between 1 March and 31 July 2014. It covered 319 men who have sex with men. One dermatologist interviewed all participants by the use of a questionnaire. Data on demographic and anthropometric characteristics (age, education, height, weight) as well as data on penis size and satisfaction were obtained. In the study we did not measure actual penis size but we asked about a man's perception of the size of his penis relative to other men's perceived penis size - participants were asked about their penis size with response categories: "below average", "average" and "above average". Participants also indicated how often they lied to others about their penis size, how satisfied they were with their penis size, and what was their perception of the importance of own penis size and their potential partner's penis size, as well as their attitudes toward penis size and body exposure concerns - comfort in a swimsuit and with exposing their bodies to a partner. Sexual history data (sexual positioning, number of sexual partners, condom use, condom feel and condom failure and history of sexually transmitted infections) were also collected.

Statistical analysis

Data were presented as numbers and percentages. Men who perceived their penis as below average and men who perceived their penis as above average were separately compared with men who perceived their penis as average. Chi-squared test or Fisher's exact p test were used to assess group differences. Statistical significance was set at 2-sided $p < 0.05$.

RESULTS

Out of 319 participants, 6.6% ($n = 21$) of men perceived their penis as "below average", 71.5% ($n = 228$) perceived their penis as "average", and 21.9% ($n = 70$) perceived their penis as "above average". In comparison with men who felt their penis was average, men with below average penis did not significantly differ by age, education, body mass index, sexual orientation and HIV status (Table 1). The same was found when men with average and above average penis were compared with the exception of sexual orientation. Men with above average penis were more frequently bisexual than men with an average penis ($p < 0.001$).

Table 1. Some characteristics of participants by penis size#

Variable	Penis size		
	Below average (n = 21) Number (%)	Average (n = 228) Number (%)	Above average (n = 70) Number (%)
Age (years):			
18-29	13 (61.9)	134 (58.8)	39 (55.7)
30-39	6 (28.6)	74 (32.5)	18 (25.7)
40+	2 (9.5)	20 (8.8)	13 (18.6)
Years at school:			
≤ 12	13 (61.9)	95 (41.7)	29 (41.4)
> 12	8 (38.1)	133 (58.3)	41 (58.6)
Body mass index:			
Underweight	0 (0.0)	3 (1.3)	2 (2.9)
Normal	13 (61.9)	165 (72.4)	52 (74.3)
Overweight	8 (38.1)	60 (26.3)	16 (22.9)
Sexual orientation:			
Homosexual	16 (76.2)	152 (66.7)	34 (48.6)
Bisexual	5 (23.8)	76 (33.3)	36 (51.4)*
HIV status:			
Positive	2 (9.5)	19 (8.3)	4 (5.7)
Negative	14 (66.7)	186 (81.6)	59 (84.3)
Untested/unknown	5 (23.8)	23 (10.1)	7 (10.0)

Participants with penis size below average and above average were separately compared with participants whose penis size was average; Chi square test or Fisher's exact p test were used to assess group differences

* P < 0.01

Compared with men who felt their penis was average, men with a below average penis were more frequently unsatisfied with their penis size ($p < 0.05$). They more frequently lied to others about their penis size ($p < 0.001$) and more frequently preferred new partners/men with below average or above average penis ($p < 0.01$). Furthermore, they more frequently felt uncomfortable when exposing undressed in front of a new partner, in a bathing suit and naked on the beach than men with an average penis. However, these differences were not statistically significant (Table 2). Men with above average penis were more frequently satisfied with their penis size than men with an average penis ($p < 0.001$), and more frequently preferred new partners/men with below average or above average penis ($p < 0.05$). They less frequently felt uncomfortable when exposing their body in front of a new partner ($p < 0.05$), in a bathing suit and being naked on the beach than men with an average penis. Opinion about the importance of penis size did not significantly differ be-

tween the compared groups.

In comparison with men with an average penis, men with below average penis more frequently took the passive sexual role ($p < 0.05$). On the other hand, those with an above average penis more frequently took the active sexual role ($p < 0.01$) (Table 3). Compared groups did not significantly differ in having a permanent sexual partner, number of sexual partners, frequency of condom use, condom feel and condom failure. The exceptions were men with above average penis who had more sexual partners especially in the past year ($p < 0.05$) and more problems with a tight condom ($p < 0.001$) than men with an average penis. (Table 3).

Penis size was not notably related to the frequency of anal/genital warts, anal/genital herpes, syphilis, hepatitis B and lice in the personal history (Table 4). However, gonorrhoea/Chlamydia was distinctly more often reported by men with above average penis than by men with an average penis ($p < 0.001$).

Table 2. Perceived penis size and related behavior and opinion about the importance of penis size#

Variable	Penis size		
	Below average (n = 21) Number (%)	Average (n = 228) Number (%)	Above average (n = 70) Number (%)
Lied about penis size:			
Never	9 (42.9)	153 (67.1)	51 (72.9)
Sometimes	6 (28.6)	67 (29.4)	18 (25.7)
Often, most/all of the time	6 (28.6)*	8 (3.5)	1 (1.4)
Satisfaction with penis size:			
I am satisfied	7 (33.3)	134 (58.8)	61 (87.1)
Wish it were bigger	14 (66.7)**	94 (41.2)	9 (12.9)*
As a new partner I prefer men whose penis size is:			
Below average	4 (19.0)	7 (3.1)	5 (7.1)
Average	9 (42.9)	154 (67.5)	37 (52.9)
Above average	8 (38.1)†	67 (29.4)	28 (40.0)**
Feel uncomfortable:			
When undressing in front of a new partner	7 (33.3)	55 (24.1)	8 (11.4)**
In bathing suit	6 (28.6)	38 (16.7)	6 (8.6)
Naked on the beach	15 (71.4)	124 (54.4)	33 (47.1)
Importance of penis size:			
Very important/important	11 (52.4)	119 (52.2)	43 (61.4)
Unimportant/totally unimportant	10 (47.7)	109 (47.8)	27 (38.5)

Participants with penis size below average and above average were separately compared with participants whose penis size was average; Chi square test or Fisher's exact p test were used to assess group differences

* P < 0.001 ** P < 0.05 † P < 0.01

Table 3. Perceived penis size and sexual behavior#

Variable	Penis size		
	Below average (n = 21) Number (%)	Average (n = 228) Number (%)	Above average (n = 70) Number (%)
Sexual role:			
Always/ mostly active	1 (4.8)	67 (29.4)	33 (47.2)
Active and passive	10 (47.6)	102 (44.7)	29 (41.4)
Always/mostly passive	10 (47.6)*	59 (25.8)	8 (11.4)**
Has permanent partner	9 (42.9)	115 (50.4)	33 (47.1)
Number of lifetime partners:			
0-5	4 (19.0)	38 (16.7)	9 (12.8)
6-10	5 (23.8)	51 (22.4)	13 (18.6)
11-20	4 (19.0)	58 (25.4)	13 (18.6)
21`+	8 (31.8)	81 (35.5)	35 (50.0)
Number of partners in the last year:			
0-2	10 (47.6)	108 (47.3)	22 (31.4)
3-5	4 (19.0)	62 (27.2)	24 (34.3)
6-9	0 (0.0)	17 (7.5)	2 (2.9)
6-9	7 (33.3)	41 (18.0)	22 (31.4)*

10+			
Condom use for oral sex:			
Never	16 (76.2)	170 (74.6)	49 (70.0)
Sometimes	1 (4.8)	41 (18.0)	17 (24.3)
Often/always	4 (19.1)	17 (7.4)	4 (5.8)
Condom use for anal sex:			
Never	1 (4.8)	8 (3.5)	1 (1.4)
Sometimes	4 (19.0)	23 (10.1)	7 (10.0)
Often/always	16 (76.2)	197 (86.4)	62 (88.6)
Condom broke:			
Never	13 (65.0)	165 (72.4)	44 (63.8)
Sometimes	6 (30.0)	61 (26.8)	23 (33.3)
Often/ always	1 (5.0)	2 (0.8)	2 (2.9)
Condom slipped of:			
Never	12 (60.0)	161 (70.6)	46 (66.7)
Sometimes	7 (35.0)	64 (28.1)	22 (31.9)
Often/always	1 (5.0)	3 (1.3)	1 (1.4)
Condom was tight:			
Never	12 (60.0)	117 (51.3)	16 (23.2)
Sometimes	5 (25.0)	79 (34.6)	29 (42.0)
Often/always	3 (15.0)	32 (14.0)	24 (34.7) [†]

Participants with penis size below average and above average were separately compared with participants whose penis size was average; Chi square test or Fisher's exact p test were used to assess group differences;

* P < 0.05 ** P < 0.01 † P < 0.001

Table 4. Perceived penis size and sexually transmitted infections#

Disease	Penis size		
	Below average (n = 21) Number (%)	Average (n = 228) Number (%)	Above average (n = 70) Number (%)
Gonorrhea/Chlamidia	3 (14.3)	18 (7.9)	21 (30.0)*
Genital ulcer diseases (Anal/genital herpes or syphilis)	1 (4.8)	24 (10.5)	7 (10.0)
Anal/genital warts	6 (28.6)	61 (26.8)	18 (25.7)
Lice	6 (28.6)	80 (35.1)	25 (35.7)
Hepatitis B	2 (9.5)	10 (4.4)	6 (8.6)

Participants with penis size below average and above average were separately compared with participants whose penis size was average; Chi square test or Fisher's exact p test were used to assess group differences

* P < 0.001

DISCUSSION

In the present study, distribution of men who have sex with men according to their perceived penis size was similar to that seen in another populations (8). Compared groups did not differ in their body mass in-

dex, suggesting that, at least in this group of participants, additional fat in the pubic region did not influence the perception of penis size.

Penis size is one of men's greatest obsessions and a top body concern. The perception of having a large penis is linked to higher self-esteem and overall body satis-

faction (10, 11). Penis size is important among both heterosexual and homosexual men. In the study conducted on 25,594 heterosexual men, 45% of the sample was dissatisfied with their penis size (10). Among men who rated their penis size as below average, 91% wanted it to be larger. This was exhibited by 46% of men who classified their penis size as average and in 14% of men who regarded their penises as above average. As much as 86% of men who classified themselves as large were content with their penis size, compared with 54% of men who regarded themselves as average and only 8% of men who classified themselves as small.

Grov, Wells, and Parson reported that 86% of the male homosexual community had measured their penis size (12). Moreover, many men-seeking-men websites have incorporated penis dimensions as a prominent feature in member's profiles (13). In the study conducted in New York City on 1,065 men who had sex with men, perceived penis size had positive correspondence to penis size satisfaction. According to the results of this study, 79.2% of men with below average penises wished their penis were larger. However, on the other hand, this wish was present in 40.5% of men with average penises and 14.7% of men with above average penises (8). In the present study, these percentages were 66.7%, 41.2% and 12.9%. Men who perceived their penis as above average were typically satisfied with their penis size. Nonetheless, only one third of men who regarded their penis as below average were happy with its size.

According to our results, perceived penis size was inversely related to lying about penis size. Men who perceived their penises below average had most frequently lied to others about their size, which is in line with the other survey (8).

In the present study, in comparison with men with an average penis, those with a below average penis, along with those with an above average penis, more frequently preferred new partners who had smaller or bigger penis than someone with an average penis. The fact that they would rather choose a partner with bigger penis is in line with the belief "the bigger, the better". The fact that there were participants who preferred partners with a smaller penis could be explained by their higher self-esteem in this regard.

Men with above average penis less frequently felt uncomfortable when exposing their body in front of a new partner, in a bathing suit and being naked on the beach than men with average and below average penis. The correspondence between penis size and body image established in this study coincides with other studies

revealing that satisfaction with penis size was in correlation with body satisfaction (10, 14).

Anal sex role preferences are a chief aspect of identity and culture among men who have sex with men. Such self-identification has been called sexual self-labels (14). Men who prefer insertive anal intercourse self-identify as "tops"; men who prefer to be exclusively receptive during anal intercourse self-identify as "bottoms" and men without preferences for either role during anal intercourse self-identify as "versatile" (9).

Penis size is the most consistent statistically significant variable with respect to predicting ideal and commonly enacted anal penetrative role. Several studies have shown that men who perceived their penises below average were more likely to identify as "bottoms" and men who perceived their penises above average were more likely to identify as "tops" (8, 9). Our findings are similar. Men with below average penis more frequently took the passive sexual role and those with above average penis more frequently an active one, despite the fact that a larger penis size may make penetrative anal sex harder and unpleasant.

Dominance and submissiveness have been suggested as potential correlates of penetrative roles. Homosexuality (passive partners in particular) is highly stigmatized in our environment, while being "bottom" has been associated with femininity and submissiveness, "bottoms" as more submissive (7, 9). However, Kippax and Smith reported that such assertions may be inconsistent and that they rely on the dynamics between sexual partners (15).

Consistent and correct use of condoms in the case of sexual intercourse (i.e. oral, vaginal and anal) outside of longstanding, mutually monogamous relationships with an uninfected partner has been the main message of public educational campaigns aiming to prevent sexually transmitted infections and HIV infection in our country. In the present study, more than 3/4 of the sample have never used a condom for oral sex, while frequent or regular condom use for anal sex was reported by 86% participants.

Several studies have shown that penis size may impact correct and consistent condom use and transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (5, 6). Moreover, experiences with the fit and feel of condoms and condom breakage and slippage reduce consistent use by some men (16, 17). If a condom is too tight it might break, if it is too large it might slip off, and the better the condom fits the safer the sex will be. In the study of Reece et al., 21% of HIV-positive men reported

that condoms felt too tight and 19% indicated that it was difficult to find the appropriate size of condoms (18). Grov et al. reported that penis length was positively associated with penis circumference, difficulty of finding condoms that fit, and condom breakage (12). In the same study, homosexual men with greater penis size values more likely report that the typical condom was "too tight". According to our results, the men with above average penis had significantly more problems with a tight condom. Some of them reported that it was impossible to find size appropriate condoms at pharmacies or even at erotic shops. This was, therefore, the main reason why they have seldom used a condom. Since "standard" size condoms could mainly be found in our market, supply of wider condom size range, especially for men with above average penises, should be recommended to the suppliers.

Men with above average penises in our study were more promiscuous than men in other groups. One half of them had more than 21 lifetime sexual partners, and had significantly more partners in the last year. Such behaviour and difficulties in condom use (i.e. lack of available condom size) may put such men at greater risk of sexually transmitted infections. Although penis size was not remarkably related to the frequency of majority of viral sexually transmitted infections, syphilis and pubic lice, in our sample gonorrhoea and Chlamydia were considerably more frequently reported by men with an above average penis than by men with an average penis. This could be explained by their incentive role in anal sex. Grove et al. also reported that men with above average penises had higher incidence of gonorrhoea and Chlamydia, but viral skin-to-skin venereal diseases (ge-

nital warts and herpes) were also more frequently reported among men in the same group (8).

Although there were no differences in HIV status between the compared groups, the highest percentage of those who were not aware of their status was among men with a below average penis. This might be explained by their passive sex role, which is known to be more risky for HIV infection, and consequently their fear of testing.

The main limitation of our study is the small number of participants. However, it should be taken into account that in our country homosexuality is still highly stigmatized and homosexuals are scarcely available to the health system and researchers. At the same time, there are no community events at which greater number of homosexuals could be found.

CONCLUSION

Perceptions of one's penis size were associated with some aspects of sexual behaviours and the frequency of sexually transmitted diseases among the men who have sex with men.

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Conflict of interest

All authors state that they have no conflicts of interest.

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Da li veličina penisa utiče na seksualno ponašanje muškaraca koji imaju seks sa muškarcima?

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SAŽETAK

Veličina polnog uda je čest razlog zabrinutosti kod većine muškaraca u zapadnim zemljama, dok je u gej kulturi penis deo tela koji se vezuje za seksualnu privlačnost i vidljivost. Cilj ovog rada je da utvrdi kako samo-percepcija veličine polnog uda utiče na seksualno ponašanje, upotrebu kondoma, učestalost polno prenosivih infekcija i seksualnu ulogu tokom analnog seksa kod muškaraca koji imaju seks sa muškarcima.

Sprovedena je studija preseka koja je obuhvatila muškarce koji imaju seks sa muškarcima koji su došli u Savetovalište za polne bolesti Gradskog zavoda za kožne i venerične bolesti u Beogradu.

Od ukupno 319 ispitanika 6,6% je percipiralo da im je veličina penisa "ispod proseka", 71,5% da je "prosečna", a 21,9% da je "iznad proseka". U poređenju sa muškarcima sa "prosečnom" veličinom penisa, oni koji su imali penis "ispod proseka" češće su bili nezadovoljni njegovom veličinom ($p < 0,05$), češće su lagali druge osobe o veličini svog penisa ($p < 0,001$) i imali pasivnu ulogu tokom analnog seksa ($p < 0,05$). Muškarci koji su imali penis "iznad proseka" češće su bili zadovoljni njegovom veličinom ($p < 0,001$), imali su aktivnu ulogu tokom analnog seksa ($p < 0,01$), veći broj seksualnih partnera ($p < 0,05$), češće probleme sa tesnim kondomom ($p < 0,001$) i češće su oboljevali od gonoreje i hlamidijaze ($p < 0,001$) u odnosu na muškarce sa "prosečnim" penisom.

Samopercepcija veličine penisa bila je udružena sa nekim aspektima seksualnog ponašanja i učestalosti polno prenosivih infekcija kod muškaraca koji imaju seks sa muškarcima.

Ključne reči: muškarci koji imaju seks sa muškarcima; veličina penisa; upotreba kondoma; seksualno ponašanje; polno prenosive infekcije