

The Magic Number

Wondering how many people your girlfriend has slept with? Good luck getting a straight answer.

At some point in any new relationship, the most awkward of questions inevitably comes up. No, it is not “Have you ever had crabs?” or “Should we have this baby?”

It's something far worse, a question that turns any right-minded man or woman into a stammering, sweating, panicked mess: “How many people have you slept with?” *Gulp.* The dreaded numbers question. For many couples, it represents a defining point in the relationship—a moment of crystalline truth.

Except for one small problem: No one ever actually tells the truth. At least, I can safely say I don't know any women who do, including me. When a man asks his girlfriend how many guys she's had sex with, her instant reaction is paralysis. *Should I be honest? What if he thinks it's too high? Will he think I'm a slag and stop liking me? If I say something too low, will he think I'm a prude who'll never be fun in the sack?* Rather than face the music, we try to figure out what the man before us wants to hear. Does he want us to be a Madonna or a whore? To wear a chastity belt or one with a bunch of notches? Britney premarriage or post-? Invariably, we choose a number with which both parties seem to be comfortable. Generally speaking, this number is seven. (Sound familiar? Sorry...)

Maybe the real reason the numbers conversation is fraught with so much tension is that it reveals just how much we care what others think of us—and how dishonest we're willing to be to control our image.

Perception vs. Reality

Just because we women lie about our numbers, it doesn't necessarily mean we're ashamed of them. “I have no problem with my number,” says 30-year-old Katie, who's been with 23 men. “I like that I've had a few one-night stands and kinky encounters. It's an exciting part of my sexual past.” Still, we're not convinced that everyone else will feel the same way. “I will never tell my boyfriend my real total,” Katie adds. “Frankly, I bet his number is lower than mine, so it would just be embarrassing.”

The fear of judgment is strong, and it's not totally unfounded. Sarah, 27, says she admits to very few people—women included—that she's slept with more than 40 men, after over-



Best. Photo booth. Ever.

hearing one of her best friends describe her to someone as “kind of a slut.” Other women couldn't care less about what their girlfriends think—in fact, sometimes when we're gossiping about sex, we wish our numbers were even higher so we'd seem like sexually confident badasses. (Then again, it depends which friends we're talking to. I'll never forget a girls-only dinner party where a friend bragged about how she'd only been with four men; the rest

of us just looked down guiltily at our plates.) When it comes to telling boyfriends, however, almost all the women I spoke to said they cut their number down—way down. “I generally shave it in half,” says Debbie, 31, who's been with more than 20 guys. The reality: We're paranoid that if you find out we've been with too many people, you'll suddenly see us as that insecure girl who once blew the entire JV basketball team in high school. ➤➤

On the flip side are women who actually lie up, boosting their numbers to make sure people won't think they've been conducting their sex lives like it's 1953. "I didn't lose my virginity until I was 22," says Andrea, 29. "Before then, I'd lie to girls and act like I'd had a lot of sex. Then, after losing it, I had a boyfriend for six years. Since we broke up, I've added a few guys onto my number, but I still feel like it's low for my age." Of course, Andrea's hardly inexperienced. Over those six years with her boyfriend, she had sex in every conceivable position, and probably got kinkier than plenty of women with higher totals. Still, she knows a low number sends a different message.

Factoring long-term relationships into the equation can skew how a number is perceived, bigtime, in either direction. "My total number doesn't sound that bad at first," says 31-year-old Adrienne, who has slept with 17 men since the age of 16. "But if you consider that I had two two-year relationships and two four-year ones—it starts to get a little scary. When exactly did those other 13 guys get onto the list?"

And here's one more reason we may not be truthful: Sometimes we just don't know what the real total is. "I honestly barely remember my number," says Laura, 30. If we've been having sex since our late teens and are now in, say, our late 20s, there are going to be some mistakes that we either can't quite recall or just want to forget. "I once did it in a park with a bell-hop when I was on vacation with my dad," says Julie, 24. "But I felt weird about it afterward, so I don't count him." And all girls agreed that they do not include anyone with whom they ever played a game of "just the tip."

What Does Your Number Say?

So now you know that women are very particular (translation: liars) when it comes to revealing their sexual pasts. But do we think the men in our lives should take creative license with their numbers as well? According to the women I spoke with, the answer is yes—but only if the number is incredibly high or mortifyingly low. No girl would be psyched to find out she's dating Wilt Chamberlain, but then again, we're not going to fawn over Steve Urkel either.

"I think a guy's number should be about 20

Fuzzy Math

Some sexual encounters will never make it onto a woman's final tally.

"I had random vacation sex with my dad's coworker. He was almost 20 years older than me. I can't count him because it's just too gross." **Darcy, 21**

"I slept with a guy who I later found out had lied about sleeping with my friend too. He was such a jerk to do that to both of us. Assholes don't count." **Anne, 27**

"I had a bad, drunken one-night stand with an engaged coworker. I couldn't erase the guilt without completely denying it ever happened." **Katie, 30**

"I woke up next to a guy, and neither of us could remember if we'd done it. So I say we didn't." **Lizzie, 23**

to 25," says Kelly, 26. "That seems appropriate. If it's too low, it'll make me think he could be a complete wimp in bed." Debbie agrees. "I'd probably just feel like another notch on the bedpost if I found out he'd been with 60 girls," she says. "But if it was too low, I'd be worried he's not very experienced." True, it's a double standard—if you've only had sex with a few women, your girlfriend will think you're a nerd; if she deems your number freakishly high, suddenly you're a himbo.

But here's the good news: While some women are grossed out by too high a number, many of us actually find it somewhat...alluring. "When I found out my boyfriend's number, I was shocked at first, and bummed that it was so high," says Jenn, 28. "But I was also kind of intrigued and impressed. It gave him an edge, like it was hot that girls were into him." Anne and her boyfriend had played the numbers game before they even had sex for the first time. She thought his number, 40, was a little high, but she also says it made her feel like he was going to be good between the sheets. "Plus, I figured that if he wasn't good in bed, I

wouldn't see him again," she says. "Because if he couldn't get it right after 40 chicks, he'd probably never get it right."

Can Anyone Handle the Truth?

While honesty is always supposed to be the best policy, when it comes to the Number, that rule may not apply. If your girl fudges her numbers, who really gets hurt? Sure, she'll have lied, but maybe she's protecting you from something you don't really want to know anyway.

The one bit of advice that everyone I spoke to agreed upon: Avoiding the conversation is the only solution. "Don't ask, don't tell," it seems, is the safest choice. If you insist upon asking anyway, here's a cold dose of reality to consider first: "Any guy I'm with should know better than to ask me," says Riley, 27. "The truth is, the reason I'm so good at sex is that I've had lots of practice." So there you have it. And if you're wondering what my real number is? Let's just say that when I was 16 a friend took me to a restaurant called the 21 Club, and I had the most delicious 26-ounce steak I've ever eaten. I've been back eight times since. Happy guessing. ●

Love Calculator

Afraid to ask how many people she's slept with? Use this formula to arrive at a semieducated guess!

 BASE NUMBER Her age: 17*	 If her dad's a cop or military man +3	 For every tattoo or piercing +1	 If she was in a sorority +5	 If her wax style is "full bush" -3	 For every time she's been to rehab +10	 For every cat she has -2	 If she's ever been married -6	 If she's a senior editor at <i>Maxim</i> +4	RESULTS Naughty or nice?
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*The average age at which women lose their virginity. The resulting number assumes she's had a measly one partner for every year since she first gave it up.