

WOMEN'S SEXUAL FUNCTION

WHAT'S NORMAL?

Sexual function changes throughout our lives and has different meanings for different people. Some people feel very little need for sexual expression and are comfortable with this. Others feel a strong need to be very sexual. Many people have expectations to perform well sexually, as in other parts of life, and this can be a source of personal tension.

Mostly, feeling well sexually and being comfortable with your own level of expression gives you a sense of general well being. If your own level of desire and expression are matched by your partner's, then this well being usually increases. Tension can arise when levels of desire for sexual activity or for certain types of sexual activity differ between partners, especially when the situation is difficult to talk about.

It is not abnormal to experience difficulties with sexual function and having difficulties does not always mean problems or a lack of sexual or emotional satisfaction.

A major survey in 2001 of nearly 20,000 adults to age 59 from the general Australian population revealed that at least one quarter of men and one half of women reported a lack of interest in sex that lasted at least one month. It is often forgotten that many women only experience desire after a level of arousal. Sexual activity often begins for reasons other than sexual desire.

The survey also found that speed of ejaculation was a concern to more than 1 in 5 men and 1 in 10 women. Not having an orgasm was a problem for around 1 in 20 men and 1 in 4 women. Not enjoying sex affected similar numbers of people. Physical pain during sex was a problem for about 1 in 5 women, affecting younger more than older women.

Anxieties about body image were extremely common, especially in younger people. At least 1 in 3 women and 1 in 7 men were worried about the way they looked. Anxiety can reduce libido and arousal greatly, and may also be a cause of rapid ejaculation.

Despite these high numbers of people with problems, most people (more than 90% of men and 80% of women) said they found sex very or extremely pleasurable. Physical pleasure in sex was strongly related to emotional satisfaction. Increasing age itself did not increase the chances of having a sexual problem.

COULD IT BE MY HORMONES?

Much has been said of the role of hormones in women's sexual function. Both oestrogen and testosterone are necessary for women's health but their precise roles are unclear.

More recent research has suggested that general life and health factors are more predictive of sexual problems than being postmenopausal. Also, poor libido is not necessarily connected with a low testosterone level. However, in individual situations, testosterone is occasionally a factor, and may need to be discussed with your doctor. Research is still at an early stage regarding women, testosterone and sexual desire.

ORGASM

Most women can learn to orgasm. Not all women will experience orgasm through vaginal stimulation or intercourse. Many women need direct clitoral stimulation or other preferred touch. The best way to learn what stimulation you like is to learn to masturbate and experiment with different types of touch. Some women find using a personal vibrator is helpful.

Confidence in communicating your preferences to your partner is very important, especially because your preferences are likely to change at different times. Your partner's attitude to achieving orgasm will also be very important. If orgasms are difficult to achieve in certain situations, then issues of trust, anxiety, privacy or vulnerability need to be discussed.

This fact sheet is designed to provide you with information on Women's Sexual Function. It is not intended to replace the need for a consultation with your doctor. All clients are strongly advised to check with their doctor about any specific questions or concerns they may have. Every effort has been taken to ensure that the information in this pamphlet is correct at the time of printing.

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Pain

Pain during sex is not normal and can be due to a number of causes. A thorough medical history and examination are needed. Vulval dermatitis is an often overlooked cause, and may be complicated by common conditions such as yeast or herpes infections. Soaps or shower gels are often drying and may contribute to sexual discomfort.

Chronic vulval pain in women is frequently misdiagnosed. Where the vulva looks normal and tests are normal, nerve hypersensitivity may be the cause of pain at the vaginal opening. There are specific treatments for this, such as physiotherapy, and you can discuss this with your doctor.

HOW DO I INCREASE MY AROUSAL?

Remember, it is common in women that desire can follow arousal. Being open to your preferred type of stimulation when there are good reasons to be sexually active can increase your desire.

Your partner's nonsexual behaviour towards you will also influence how receptive you will be for sex.

Many women do not notice that they are well lubricated in response to sexual stimulation, and only recognize emotional arousal. Therefore, if they are not emotionally involved, they will not feel aroused. Some women, however, can become emotionally aroused but not by direct genital stimulation. Instead, they may prefer talking or non-sexual touching. There is still much to be understood about these experiences.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Good Loving, Great Sex. Dr. Rosie King.
(For both men and women, numerous specialized resources provided within).

Getting the Sex You Want. A Women's Guide to Becoming Proud, Passionate and Pleased in Bed. Leiblum S and Sachs J. 2002.

The Elusive Orgasm. A Women's Guide to Why She Can't and How She Can Orgasm.
Dr. Vivienne Cass. 2004.

Becoming Orgasmic: A Sexual and Personal Growth Program for Women.
Heiman J and LoPiccolo J. Prentice-Hall New York 1988.

The V Book.
A Doctor's Guide to Complete Vulvovaginal Health.
Drs. Elizabeth Stewart and Paula Spencer.

Guide to Getting It On. Paul Joannides.
www.goofyfootpress.com (direct and humorous book for men and women from America).

For Women Only.
Drs. Jennifer Berman and Laura Berman. Virago 2001.

Femalia. Ed. Joani Blank. (collection of photos to show the variation in appearance of women's vulvas).

Bookstores and video resources in Melbourne also through Family Planning Victoria, and Bliss for Women (female friendly sex shop).

General information for women in Victoria through WIRE (Women's Information and Referral Exchange).

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