



Sexuality And Sexual Problems

Women — whether married or single, young or old — differ greatly in their sexual interest and response. A woman's sexual function is not limited to sexual intercourse. Her sexuality also includes the way she thinks and feels about herself as a woman.

Some women have trouble with sex at some time in their lives. They often find it hard to talk about their sexual concerns — even with their partner, a trusted friend or their doctor.

Sexuality

Sexual identity is shaped and reshaped throughout life. A number of key factors affect your sexual development. These include early role models, religious teachings and early sexual experiences — both good and bad.

Sexual Problems

A woman's progress through the sexual response cycle varies greatly from one time to another (see box). No one pattern is more "normal" than another. If any of the stages of the cycle does not occur, though, it may cause a sexual problem.

The Sexual Response Cycle A woman's body follows a regular pattern when she has sex. There are four stages:

- Desire
- Arousal
- Orgasm
- Resolution

Sexual response depends on a complex interplay — physical and emotional — between two people.

Sexual problems can be linked to a physical condition, such as pregnancy or an illness. They also can relate to daily stress, poor communication between partners, unrealistic ideas about sexual performance, or problems with trust and commitment.

Lack of Desire

Lack of interest in sex — or lack of desire — is the most common sexual problem in women. With a low level of sexual desire, a woman may have a hard time getting aroused.

Many women find that the stresses of daily living — such as concerns about work, family and money — can create a lack of desire.

Lack of Orgasm

Most women are able to have an orgasm during sexual activity. Some may reach orgasm by masturbation or by having their partner arouse them with their hands or with oral sex.

Problems with reaching orgasm can stem from negative feelings about sex learned in childhood.

Women who have suffered a trauma related to sex, such as sexual abuse, may not be able to reach orgasm.



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If a woman has no orgasm during sex, it does not mean it was a failure. Sharing love, closeness, warmth and tenderness are often enough.

Painful Sex

Dyspareunia is a term for pain during or after sex. This may include pain during entry into the vagina, pain during deep thrusting, or pain after sex. The pain can be on the surface or deep, along the middle of the pelvis, or on one or both sides.

The most common cause is that the vagina is not well lubricated.

Vaginismus also can cause pain during sex. This is a spasm of the pubic muscles and lower vagina. It makes entering the vagina painful.

Conditions That Can Affect Your Sexual Function

Some conditions can have a big impact on sexuality. They may be short-term, such as the flu or pregnancy, or may persist over time and require the couple to adjust.

Pregnancy

In most cases, sexual activity doesn't have to change during pregnancy. Sex does not harm the fetus unless certain conditions are present.

Menopause

As women approach menopause, they may lose desire slowly, have a hard time getting aroused, and feel pain during sex. The lack of estrogen that occurs after menopause makes the vagina dry.

Cancer

Women with cancer often worry about how the disease will affect their sex life. Surgery, radiation and chemotherapy can be painful and sap the woman's energy. She may struggle with fears of death, disfigurement or the partner's rejection.

Chronic Illness

Diseases that persist for a lifetime, such as diabetes, arthritis or heart disease, can have a major impact on a woman's self-image and her ability to feel sexual. Some medications can affect her desire or make it hard to reach orgasm.

Male Factor

If a male partner is having sexual problems, pleasure for both partners may be affected. Many men have trouble with impotence — not being able to achieve or keep an erection — at some time in their lives. Impotence is usually caused by physical or medical factors.

If You Think You Have a Problem

Nearly every couple has a problem with sex at some time in their lives. Some problems go away on their own or can be worked out with patience and a caring and informed partner. Others may take more effort and a change of approach.

If you think you may have a health condition that is stopping you from enjoying sex, see your doctor. Any pain in the pelvic, genital or vaginal area is a sign that there may be a problem.



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Your doctor may be able to help you. Your doctor also can refer you to other experts. Sex counseling for individuals or couples is often short term and works well.

Finally . . .

Being able to express yourself sexually lasts a lifetime. It should be nurtured — it's a key part of feeling fulfilled. For all women, talking about sexual needs and concerns is a process that should never end. Sexual problems are common. If you are having a problem with sex, know there are many people with the skills and understanding to help.

(Adapted from the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists handout)