



Sex from go to 'ohh!'

Through the course of a lifetime, a person's sex life will ebb and flow. It can help to know what changes to expect - and how to roll with them.

By Muriel Reddy



Sex is good for you. It lifts your heart rate as well as your pleasure-boosting endorphins. It can make you feel happy and – hold the eye rolling – it can feel good throughout all the ages of womanhood. Sex does not belong to the young.

“The fact is that women go on merrily bonking into their 80s,” says sex educator and columnist Maureen Matthews.

The sexual journey is not, however, without challenges. Differences in libido, painful sex and the effects of childbirth, child rearing as well as the physical

and emotional influences of menopause can impact not just women, but their relationships.

“Life has ups and downs,” says Ms Matthews. “We need to get that information to women rather than allowing them to (believe in) a Disney fantasy.”

The sexual expectations placed on women today are demanding and, according to leading sex therapist Dr Rosie King, pornography is partly to blame. “It is not reality,” she says. “It is entertainment and it shows a very unrealistic portrayal of what women enjoy and what

sex is like ... [it] puts a lot of pressure on women, particularly young women.”

We know teenagers are sexually active. According to data provided two years ago in the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, one in three teenagers had engaged in sexual intercourse by the age of 16-17. Dr King says girls who want to delay intercourse will instead perform oral sex on their partner. “They don't want to go all the way, so they see [it] as a normal part of pre-intercourse activity, foreplay.”

In the beginning

At the start of a woman's sex life – or the beginning of a new relationship – couples "often cannot get enough of each other" says Dr King, "and they expect it to stay that way forever." This is known as the 'limerence' period – or courtship phase – but it always ends.

"The message to all women would be regardless of your age or the stage of your life, you owe it to yourself – for good pelvic health – to be well-versed in your vulval and internal anatomy"

"When couples come to see me, that's their expectation – that they will get back to what they had in the beginning," says Dr King. "After limerence, you get desire discrepancy."

Desire discrepancy

This occurs when one partner is dissatisfied with the level of sexual engagement and the other partner feels pressure. It is the most common issue

Dr King sees in practice. "A study done in the UK reported that 15% of men reported a lack of interest in sex compared to 35% of women," she says. "It's probably the same here."

It can be complex to treat. "Often there are numerous reasons why women are less interested in sex," she explains. "As Jerry Seinfeld said, 'women need a reason to have sex, men just need a place'.

"You can expect mothers with babies and young children to have low interest in sex for a very good reason – they are tired. If they are breastfeeding, they have high levels of prolactin which switches off the sex drive and makes the vagina dry."

Libido – the clinical view

There is a huge range in what is a normal libido. Several factors influence it, says Jean Hailes endocrinologist Dr Sonia Davison. They include long-term relationships, lower general health, care of dependents (elderly and/or children), working, as well as the contraceptive pill and antidepressants.





RECOMMENDED READING

Come as You Are
by Emily Nagoski

Mating in Captivity
by Esther Perel

Sex for One
by Betty Dodson

Love Worth Making
by Stephen Snyder

“Lots of women are doing all those things and expect their libido to be as rip-roaring as it was in their 20s,” says Dr Davison. “It’s often the first thing to leave the building. Libido is around so we can procreate and as we age, it becomes less of an imperative.”

She believes it’s important for women to recognise what makes them happy in terms of sexual function. “If there is a change that distresses you, seek [professional] advice because there are options out there,” she says.

Pelvic floor

Well-functioning pelvic floor muscles are thought to help with increasing pleasurable sensations during sex. “If women orgasm, the pelvic floor muscles contract and that increases pleasure,” explains Jean Hailes pelvic floor physiotherapist Janetta Webb. “But we need our pelvic floor muscles to work effectively.”

Training of those muscles is key. “The message to all women would be regardless of your age or the stage of your life, you owe it to yourself – for good pelvic health – to be well-versed in

your vulval and internal anatomy,” she says

Half of the women seen by Ms Webb have weak – or underactive – pelvic floor muscles while the remainder have overactive muscles. This is common in adult women of all ages and can be triggered as a defence mechanism to pain – for example, women with endometriosis often experience pain during sex. More than half the women Ms Webb sees every day have issues with painful sex.

Painful sex

Vaginismus (involuntary vaginal tightening when penetration is attempted) is one of the most common problems that Associate Professor Wendy Vanselow sees as head of psychosexual medicine at the Royal Women’s Hospital in Melbourne. “There are a lot of women who have difficulty in consummating their relationships and who can wait years to come in [for treatment],” she says. “Often it is because they don’t know where to go.”

Some women experience pain during intercourse because of vulval pain, including vulvodynia (a burning or sore feeling around



the vulva). “There are so many causes for that and again we are trying to use more topical pain relief and physiotherapy.”

Assoc Prof Vanselow says many issues – diabetes, chronic illness, menopause – impact on a woman’s sexuality. “Older women particularly, but not solely, can have libido issues,” she says. “Lots of contraceptives can have an impact on libido and that needs to be taken seriously and investigated.”

After menopause

While most postmenopausal women can have sex without difficulty, some can experience a shrinkage of the vaginal entrance as well as a loss of lubrication. This can lead to pain and discomfort during intercourse, but there are solutions, says gynaecologist and Jean Hailes medical director Dr Elizabeth Farrell. “Women can try a lubricant or some oil – olive or sweet almond – or they can be prescribed some vaginal oestrogen which will increase bloodflow,” she says.

“Using vaginal moisturisers two or three times a week can help with vaginal dryness.”

Women can also discuss with their doctor the use of menopausal hormone therapy (MHT) to treat menopause symptoms including vaginal dryness.

What women want

Dr King says it is a myth to suggest older women don’t want or need sex. “They may not be able to do what they did when they were 20 ... but they can be creative,” she says.

Many women – young and old – find creativity in the use of sex toys. Chris Joseph, chief of operations of online adult store, Randy Fox, says that a survey of 2000 customers last year revealed that 42% were women, while products designed for use by women accounted for 62% of sales.

The final word

Sex matters. To many women, it’s the cornerstone of a relationship. It provides not just sexual gratification, but also intimacy. They are needs that can ebb and flow over the life journey, but they can be as vital to an 80-year-old as to an 18-year-old. **MR**

3 THINGS TO KNOW

1. You do not have to endure pain during sex. Talk to your doctor.
2. Childbirth, motherhood, and menopause can all impact your sexual desire.
3. Good pelvic floor health is good for sex. Start exercising those muscles. See page 14 to learn how to strengthen your pelvic floor.



Learn more about sex and sexual health

