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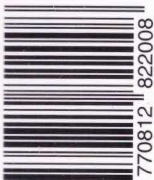
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The power of pleasure

If you're having them, you're loving them, but you may not realise the huge range of health benefits orgasms bring.

Words SONIA ZADRO

In the past two centuries we've come a long way in our attitude towards understanding sexual pleasure and the orgasm. Less than 200 years ago it was believed a woman was not capable of experiencing orgasm outside of sexual penetration by a man — and likely didn't experience sexual desire at all. Unsurprisingly, many women were sexually frustrated, complaining to their doctors of irritability, nervousness, headaches, erotic fantasies, insomnia and heaviness in the lower abdomen. These came to be known as symptoms of a female medical condition called "hysteria", though nearly any behaviour could be attributed to "hysteria". British physician Havelock Ellis, wrote that nearly 75 per cent of women suffered from it.

Fortunately, physicians eventually found they could do something that miraculously made these symptoms disappear: a "physician-assisted paroxysm". This was simply a pelvic massage that resulted in — you guessed it — an orgasm. But, of course, it wasn't called an orgasm. Instead, if a woman became flushed and happy from her pelvic massage, she was said to have undergone a "hysterical paroxysm", another medical term. As expected, women reported feeling relaxed and wonderful after their "hysterical paroxysms" and usually came back for more.

If you are appalled by this practice, understand that the doctors of the day didn't think they were doing anything remotely sexual, because they didn't consider women to be sexual beings. Rather, physicians, and women, viewed it as a purely medical treatment used to successfully cure their "hysteria".

In fact, it was because the doctors of the day complained of sore, cramped hands in having to cure all this "hysteria" that vibrators were eventually invented, though only for medical purposes to begin with, of course. This practice of medical massage to treat female "hysteria" even dates back to ancient Greece and Egypt.

Thank goodness times have changed. Yes, women do actually experience sexual

desire, pleasure and orgasm, just like men. And not only have taboos of sex and masturbation diminished for men and women, but we have now discovered many orgasmic health benefits. Those 19th-century doctors were onto something, even if their thinking was seriously misguided. So how do orgasms benefit you? In so many ways. Here are just some of them.

Benefits of orgasms

Keeps you young

It's great to know that orgasms may be shedding years off your looks. Neuropsychologist, Dr Weeks, of the Royal Edinburgh Hospital, over 10 years interviewed more than 3500 people aged 18 to 102 from Britain, Europe and the US. These participants responded to an advertisement placed in the *New Scientist* seeking people who looked and felt younger than they were. To accurately assess whether they really appeared younger, Weeks had volunteers guess these participants' ages. Overall, the men were estimated to be 12 years younger, and the women 10 years younger than their real ages. Weeks then identified what contributed to these youthful looks. Genes were found to contribute 25 per cent to their youthful looks, but behaviour was found to contribute 75 per cent.

One defining behaviour was that all these participants had sex at least three times a week rather than the average of twice a week. Weeks noted these participants were also in strong loving relationships. He said the human growth hormone released during sex makes skin more elastic and thought this accounted for their looks. The increase in the hormone DHEA during and after orgasm is also thought to be associated with shiny hair and bright skin.

Increases your lifespan & improves immunity

Not only do orgasms make us look younger, they make us live longer. In a study of 129 mothers it was found that sexual intimacy actually increased the length of their telomeres. Telomeres are DNA



nucleoproteins that shorten with stress and ageing. Longer telomeres predict longer lifespans. Women in the study who reported any sexual intimacy during the week had significantly longer telomeres regardless of age, weight, perceived stress and other relationship factors.

As well as lengthening lives, orgasm may promote healthier lives. Another study testing the saliva of 112 college students found students who had sex three or more times a week had higher immune cell antibodies (IgA levels) than those who had sex once or twice a week.

Improves intimacy & satisfaction in relationships

While some people downplay the importance of sex in relationships, it's interesting to know that it does promote bonding. A study from Florida State University found that sexual satisfaction or that "afterglow" from sex, lasts about 48 hours after sex. Furthermore, couples experiencing a stronger afterglow reported feeling more satisfied in their relationships several months later.



It was thought that sexual afterglow promoted a sense of bonding in relationships, boosting relationship satisfaction in the long term. Researchers examined data from two independent studies of more than 200 newlywed couples. Although marital satisfaction declined at four to six months follow-up, those who began with higher levels of sexual afterglow were more satisfied in their relationships compared to their peers.

Promotes relaxation, sleep & reduces pain

The increase in oxytocin and prolactin from an orgasm is thought to calm the nerves, reduce stress and promote restful sleep. One study examining the effect of sexual activity on the brains of rats found that over time sex had the effect of raising feel-good endorphin levels and flushing out the inflammatory hormone cortisol, which is released during stressful times. It also promoted growth of brain cells and promoted relaxation.

Keep in mind, that which helps us relax tends to decrease our experience of pain, and the natural chemicals released during orgasm such as dopamine, endorphins

and serotonin not only make us happy, but relieve pain in a variety of ways, including assisting with migraines.

Lowers blood pressure & promotes a healthy heart

If they help you relax, it's not surprising that orgasms may lower blood pressure. In a study of adults aged 20–47 years, sex among partners who lived together was shown to produce lower blood pressure. This was not the case when sex occurred alone or with people who didn't live together. It was therefore thought that the bonding created over time from sex between couples living together played an important role in lowering blood pressure.

Along with this decrease in blood pressure, sex improves circulation by bringing a fresh supply of blood to your body's vital organs and is associated with reduced risk of heart attack in men. One study showed that sex less than twice a week for men correlated with increased cardiovascular disease.

Burns calories

Many will be thrilled to know orgasms

burn considerable calories. In Canadian research, 20 couples aged 18–35 were instructed to have sex once a week for a month and jog on a treadmill. Interestingly, it was found that some men expended more energy while having sex than on the treadmill. This study found that you burn, on average, 85 calories during moderate sex, but other researchers suggest you can burn an average of 200 calories in a 30-minute session of sex.

Promotes mental health

Finally, given all the benefits you receive from the chemicals released during orgasm, it's no surprise they're good for your mental health. In fact, orgasms produce natural antidepressant chemicals like serotonin, phenylethylamine (found in chocolate) and endorphins, which are three times as strong as morphine. Also, a large Swedish study revealed female orgasms from penile stimulation of the vagina were associated with greater satisfaction with sex life, mental health, relationships with partners and friends, and life in general.



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So why am I not having them?

You're stressed

Stress expert Dr Andrew Goliszek explains how chronic stress lowers the concentration of all sex hormones. This is because stress hormones like cortisol are made to fight off danger at the expense of sex hormones like testosterone. During stress the body thinks, "In order to live I don't need to procreate", so libido is suppressed. This not only lowers sex drive, preventing orgasms, but it also can interfere with ovulation, sperm count and fertility.

Dr Lam, an expert on adrenal fatigue, says that if in addition to low libido you are also experiencing symptoms like brain fog, tiredness after eight hours sleep, difficulty getting to sleep, low blood pressure, breathlessness, irritability and reliance on stimulants like coffee, you may actually have adrenal fatigue and this could be causing your libido issues.

Performance pressure

Sexologist Dr Jessica O'Reilly, who refers to herself in her podcast as Dr Jess, says the second big obstacle to orgasms is performance pressure. Spectatoring is part of this. It's like the flipside of mindfulness and involves looking at yourself in the third person and judging your performance and appearance instead of enjoying

the moment. The more pressure, the less pleasure, so worrying about your appearance, erection, orgasm and endurance impedes orgasm.

To decrease performance pressure, she suggests playing the role of receiver during sex, using mindful masturbation to get in touch with your own body's responses, and opening your mind about sex to include different ways to reach orgasm. She says you don't have to orgasm every time you have sex as there are still enormous benefits without it, such as intimacy and bonding from touch and holding your partner. Furthermore, orgasms come in all sizes and don't have to be overwhelming. So you haven't screamed to the heavens? It doesn't mean you haven't experienced the many benefits orgasm brings.

Along with their bountiful benefits, how nice is it to know orgasms can become more enjoyable as you get older? Research from the University of California measured the sexual activity of 806 post-menopausal women. It found that, although frequency of orgasms decreased with age, women over 80 reported a higher degree of orgasm satisfaction almost always or always. So if you want to reap the myriad orgasmic benefits, not to mention the pleasure, keep on having them.

Tips for mindful sex

- **Go blind.** Use a blindfold to heighten your sensations of touch, smell, taste and sound while reducing visual distractions.
- **No mobiles.** Leave mobile devices at the bedroom door. No exceptions.
- **Breathe.** Breathe purposefully and deeply as breath is connected to sexual response and orgasm.
- **Meditate regularly.** To be present and clear your mind.
- **Slow down.** Don't go straight for the genitals but explore the rest of the sensual body.
- **Make lists.** Write down tasks you need to complete so they don't run through your mind during sex.

You're not present

Dr Jess believes the number one complaint for not having orgasms after poor communication, intimacy and connection being distracted and not present. She says people even text during sex! She suggests the above tips to stay present during sex.

Sonia Zadro is a freelance writer and clinical psychologist with 20 years of experience. She is interested in helping people heal and opening their minds through science. W: soniazadro.c