

Presented by HealthyWomen

## Sex Myths and Facts for Women Under 50

When it comes to sex, it sometimes seems that there is more rumor and misinformation swirling around than there are positions in the *Kama Sutra*, the ancient Indian book about love-making. Read on to help you learn the facts about sexual health.

The first fact you should know is that your sexual health is important to your overall health. You deserve to have a satisfying sex life—whatever that means for you.

### No Magic Formula for Sexual Health

If you think everyone else is having terrific sex multiple times a week, you might just have it wrong. In fact, the frequency with which women have intercourse is all over the map. What's "normal" when it comes to the quantity of sex for one person may not be considered "normal" for another. One review of 86 studies found that women in the 20-something age range through the 40-something age range had sex between one and 11 times a month. Even at the high end, that's only about three times a week. Yet, a survey of 1,200 women of all ages and ethnicities found that about half believed they weren't getting enough sex. Most thought they were having less sex than they *should* in order to be sexually healthy.

Here's the secret: There is no magic formula. The amount of sex you should have is the amount that makes you and your partner happy. That could be twice a day, twice a month or even twice a

year. As long as your sex life is satisfying and doesn't negatively affect your mood or your life, you don't have a problem. The quality of sex is just as important (if not more so) than how often you have it.

### Sex and Your Life

Plenty of things can affect a woman's sex life. Here are just a few:

- Reproductive milestones like pregnancy, childbirth and menopause
- Relationship issues
- Medications
- Medical conditions
- Stress

If you think anything on this list is affecting your sex life, ask your health care provider for guidance. If you are experiencing a sexual health issue, it's worth talking about.

### What's a Sexual Problem?

If there's one thing women agree on when it comes to sex it is this: Sex is important in their lives. We also know that when things don't go well with sex, it can affect every part of your life, including your self-esteem.

Unfortunately, a surprisingly high number of women have one or more problems where sex is concerned. They might have low or no desire, difficulty getting aroused, pain when having sex or inability to reach orgasm. Interestingly, young women report just as many issues with diminished desire and orgasm as older women.

### Sex Differs for Women and Men

A woman's sexuality is far different than a man's. Unlike men, in whom thinking about sex translates to an erection, arousal in women (vaginal wetness, increased blood flow to the vagina) often comes about *after* love-making begins. In other words, a woman might begin lovemaking relatively uninterested, doing it because she wants to please her partner or because it makes her feel good about herself. As things progress and she focuses on the stimulation and feelings, she becomes aroused and her libido spikes.

That's why it's so hard for many women to "get in the mood" when they're distracted or feeling overwhelmed. It's also why it's difficult for a woman to feel

### Questions to Ask Your Health Care Professional

1. Why am I just not interested in sex anymore?
2. What medical condition could be contributing to my lack of interest?
3. Could my medication be affecting my sex life?
4. Is there something I can do differently in managing my medical condition so it doesn't affect my sexual functioning as much?
5. Could counseling help me with my sexual problem? Can you refer me to someone?
6. What can I do within my relationship to improve things?

sexual toward her partner if she is fighting with her partner or if she feels unloved or unappreciated.

As for levels of desire ... well, although every woman and every relationship is unique, studies find that men often have higher levels of sexual desire (that is, they want sex more often) than women. The most important components of wanting to have sex with your partner, however, are your emotional relationship with that person and your overall well-being.

Another thing to consider is the fact that your sexual health is linked to your physical and your emotional health and vice versa. Think about it. If you don't feel well, either physically or emotionally, you're not likely to want to have sex. For instance, lack of sexual interest is a common symptom of depression. Many of us, however, miss this connection between our sexual health and our emotional and physical health. Just one-third of respondents in that same survey of 1,200 women mentioned earlier thought sex was "very" or "extremely" important to their overall health.

### Communication Is Key

One of the key components to a good sex life could be how you communicate (or even *if* you communicate) with your partner. The two of you

need to be able to express your needs, including how often you want sex, and to discuss what you *don't* want. You also need to understand each other's needs and compromise when necessary.

The other person you may need to communicate with about sexual problems is your health care professional. Numerous medical and psychological issues can contribute to sexual dysfunction, including depression, hormonal imbalances (including thyroid disorders), diabetes and other chronic conditions such as autoimmune disorders. A number of medications can also affect your sex health.

### Sexual Health at Every Life Stage

Being open and honest about your sex life is important at any life stage. It's a myth that as you grow older, you lose interest in and satisfaction from sex. If you're approaching menopause, for example, vaginal dryness and night sweats and related fatigue *can* interfere with sexual satisfaction, but they don't mean your sex life must come to an end. In fact, there are treatment options for these menopause-related symptoms, if they are bothersome. Be sure to discuss life changes and their affects on your sex life with your partner and with your health care professional.

## Sexual Health Facts

- Sexual problems occur in women of all ages.
- Medical, emotional and physiological issues can be underlying causes of sexual problems.
- Sexual problems can be resolved.

## Resources

**American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy**  
703-838-9808  
[www.aamft.org](http://www.aamft.org)

**American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors and Therapists**  
804-752-0026  
[www.aasect.org](http://www.aasect.org)

**American Menopause Foundation**  
212-714-2398  
[www.americanmenopause.org](http://www.americanmenopause.org)

**Association of Reproductive Health Professionals**  
202-466-3825  
[www.arhp.org](http://www.arhp.org)

**HealthyWomen**  
1-877-986-9472  
Free booklet: "The Truth About Sex in Your 20s, 30s, & 40s"  
[www.HealthyWomen.org](http://www.HealthyWomen.org)  
[www.SexandaHealthierYou.org](http://www.SexandaHealthierYou.org)

**National Vulvodynia Association**  
301-299-0775  
[www.nva.org](http://www.nva.org)

**The Vulvar Pain Foundation**  
336-226-0704  
[www.vulvarpainfoundation.org](http://www.vulvarpainfoundation.org)

## Who's Who for Sexual Health

Health care professionals with experience treating one or more sexual health issues include:

- Family physician
- Marriage counselor
- Nurse practitioner in reproductive health
- Obstetrician/gynecologist
- Sex therapist
- Psychiatrist
- Psychologist
- Urologist
- Urogynecologist

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For more information about sexual health, visit [www.HealthyWomen.org](http://www.HealthyWomen.org) and [www.SexandaHealthierYou.org](http://www.SexandaHealthierYou.org) or call toll-free: 1-877-986-9472.