



KAISER PERMANENTE®

Physical and Psychological Causes of Women's Sexual Problems

Although all women have the natural capacity to enjoy sexual activity, sometimes we do not—for a variety of reasons. In fact, having difficulty in becoming sexually aroused or having difficulty achieving an orgasm is actually quite common. A lack of libido is common, too. This means that you have less interest in sex than you once did, or you have no interest in having sex at all.

There are some physical health factors that may affect a woman's sexual response. Such factors may include: fatigue; the effect of a drug; alcohol use; diabetes; or an injury to the spinal cord. The particular shape of a woman's anatomy can also make intercourse difficult or painful in some cases. Furthermore, every individual's sexual response may be affected by the time of month or by the person's age as a result of changing hormone levels.

In addition to these physical factors, having trouble enjoying sex can also be related to—non-physical—or psychological factors. Such factors may include: emotional stress—particularly as it pertains to the relationship; lack of self-esteem; contraception; lack of adequate privacy or time for lovemaking; or performance anxiety. All of these factors can contribute to a lack of libido or difficulty in having an orgasm.

If a woman doesn't experience orgasm, it usually means that there are either psychological or physical factors that need to be determined or there are physical techniques that need to be learned. Sometimes, all three factors need to be addressed. Learning more about her own sexual response will help a woman learn how to have a orgasm.

A woman's body is strongly affected by her state of mind. If religious or social values make it difficult for a woman to accept her desires or actions, she may be unable to enjoy sex or she may have mixed feelings about her sexuality. With these conflicts, her body may simply not respond. Exploring and accepting her feelings about sexuality, and reducing stress in her life or in her relationship may help a woman enjoy sex more.

A basic requirement in any sexual relationship is open communication between partners. This is particularly important for women because many female physical responses are more subtle and cannot be as easily seen as a man's obvious erection or ejaculation. Some signs of sexual arousal in a woman are the nipples of the breasts becoming firm and sensitive, swelling of the vulva (or labia), increased secretions, and opening of the vagina. It's important for a woman to tell her partner what she likes and doesn't like sexually, and it's equally important for her partner to be sensitive and attentive.

Many women cannot reach orgasm through sexual intercourse alone. After being physically aroused, they may need direct stimulation of the clitoris—either manually, orally, or through specific positioning during intercourse. Exploring her body's response through masturbation may help a woman learn more about what works for her and she can then teach her partner how to help her have an orgasm. A woman should feel free to communicate to her partner just what she needs. With a caring partner, many women who were previously unable to enjoy sex can experience great pleasure.

If you're concerned that a physical problem or a drug may be interfering with your ability to enjoy sex or reach orgasm, discuss this with your doctor or health care professional. If you believe that the problem is more psychological in nature, you might want to consider scheduling an appointment with the Psychiatry Department at your local Kaiser Permanente facility.



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- Visit your local Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center
- Check your Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook
- Listen to the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone messages at 1-800-33 ASK ME (1-800-332-7563)

To get your free Handbook and Healthphone Directory, call 1-800-464-4000.

The information presented here is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of professional medical care. If you have persistent health problems or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor or other health care professional.

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