

Santé!

Holistic Health News from Dr. Sarah Cimperman
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"Love is the greatest refreshment in life."

Pablo Picasso

Optimizing Sexual Health

A happy and healthy sex life can be a complicated affair. Life gets busy, work stressful, schedules overbooked and sleep short. Other factors, like emotional and relationship issues may make matters more difficult. But even when the spirit is willing, sometimes the body is not. Sexual dysfunction is defined as the loss of sexual desire and/or the inability to become aroused or have sex. Understanding and addressing the physical issues involved is the first step toward a more active and joyful sex life.

Sex Hormones

Naturally, sex hormones – testosterone, estrogen and progesterone – play a prominent role in sexual function. Deficiency may occur after menopause or removal or damage to ovaries and testicles following injury, surgery, chemotherapy or radiation. When levels are low, hormone replacement therapy may improve sexual desire and performance. (However, hormone levels don't always correlate with symptoms and some individuals who are deficient have a normal sex life, while others experiencing problems have normal hormone levels.)

Hormone replacement therapy is not without risk. Supplementing testosterone can increase cholesterol levels, blood pressure, and risk for heart attack and stroke. In men, it can increase the size of the breasts and prostate. Testosterone also accelerates growth of prostate cancer. In women, it may have masculinizing effects, including male-pattern hair growth or hair loss, a deeper or hoarse voice, smaller breasts and an enlarged clitoris. It can also cause acne and irregular menstrual cycles. A study published last year in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* that followed more than 120,000 women from the Nurses' Health Study concluded that women who took estrogen and testosterone had a two and a half times higher risk of developing breast cancer.

Because bioidentical hormones exactly match those made by the body, they are better tolerated and less likely to have side effects. For best results, individuals seeking hormone treatment should work with a doctor who can run tests and prescribe a compounded formula of bioidentical hormones if necessary.

Pharmaceutical Medications

Prescription medications have proved helpful for men experiencing erectile dysfunction when blood flow to the penis is compromised. Drugs such as Cialis, Viagra and Levitra increase levels of nitric oxide and dilate blood vessels, increasing blood flow to the penis and facilitating an erection. These medications have not been approved for use in women and studies have not shown conclusively that they are helpful.

Certain medications can have negative sexual side effects. These include antidepressants, antihistamines, appetite suppressants, tranquilizers, opioid analgesics, chemotherapy, and medications used to treat diabetes and high blood pressure. Individuals taking these drugs and experiencing sexual dysfunction should talk to their doctor about other options. Smoking cigarettes can also decrease sexual performance and satisfaction by damaging blood vessels and reducing circulation.

Overall Health

Because a healthy body is essential for a healthy sex life, illnesses that interfere with sexual function must be addressed. These conditions include coronary artery disease, atherosclerosis, hypertension, hypothyroidism, diabetes, overweight, arthritis, multiple sclerosis, depression, anxiety, incontinence, urinary tract and sexually transmitted infections. Peyronie's disease in men and endometriosis and vaginismus in women can also compromise sexual function.

Food can be used as medicine to optimize health and sexuality. Choosing organic foods whenever possible will reduce exposure to xenoestrogens in pesticide residues that can interfere with sex hormone balance. Reducing consumption of trans-fats and foods high in saturated animal fats while increasing healthy fats – like wild cold water fish, olive oil, avocado, raw nuts and seeds – and foods high in fiber can improve cardiovascular health and ensure optimal circulation.

Daily aerobic exercise is also essential for good circulation and healthy hormone balance. Additionally, it boosts energy, raises endorphins, increases stamina, strengthens muscles and bones, and improves flexibility and body image. Kegel exercises can improve sexual function in women. Contracting and relaxing muscles that control the flow of urine strengthen the pelvic floor and increase blood supply to the

vagina, which in turn can increase clitoral sensitivity and strengthen orgasms.

Natural Remedies for Men

The amino acid arginine has a mechanism of action similar to drugs like Cialis, Viagra and Levitra. This natural alternative increases levels of nitric oxide and several studies have supported its use in the treatment of erectile dysfunction. Arginine can also increase the activity of herpes viruses, so people with these infections should talk to their doctor before using it.

The bark from the West African Yohimbe tree is well researched for the treatment of erectile dysfunction. By blocking alpha-2 adrenergic receptors, it increases the release of norepinephrine. This raises arterial pressure and increases blood flow to the penis, facilitating an erection. The active constituent, an alkaloid named yohimbine, has been used as a drug but the herbal extract is available without a prescription.

Ginkgo biloba can also improve circulation. This herb has been most studied for its ability to increase blood flow to the brain, but it can also increase blood flow to other areas, including the penis. As with pharmaceutical prescriptions, Ginkgo and Yohimbe can have side effects and interact with other medications. They should only be used under the supervision of a doctor.

Natural Remedies For Women

For women who experience vaginal dryness, lubricants make intercourse easier and less painful. Many natural products are available and some contain soothing vitamin E, warming cinnamon oil or stimulating homeopathic remedies. Hormone-balancing herbs include black cohosh, wild yam, dong quai and chaste tree berry. Damiana has a long history of use as an aphrodisiac. These herbal medicines should only be used under the supervision of a doctor trained in botanical medicine.

Of course, sexuality involves not only physical factors but has emotional, psychological and spiritual components as well. Hormones, medications and herbal remedies are no substitute for good communication and spending quality time with your partner.

Ask the Doc: Antioxidant-Rich foods

Why are antioxidants important? How can I get them from my diet?

DK

Staten Island, New York

Antioxidants protect our cells from harmful free radicals that can damage DNA and cause cancer. Although a daily multiple vitamin-mineral supplement is beneficial for certain people, nutrients from food are always better than nutrients from pills. And antioxidants are no exception.

According to the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* these 15 foods, listed in descending order, have the highest concentration of antioxidants:

- Blackberries
- Walnuts
- Strawberries
- Cooked artichokes*
- Cranberries
- Coffee
- Raspberries
- Pecans
- Blueberries
- Ground cloves
- Grape juice
- Dark chocolate
- Cranberry juice
- Sour cherries
- Red wine

Incorporate these into your diet and make it your goal to eat five colors each day: red, orange, yellow, green, and blue or purple. Remember, food is medicine.

* Cooking can increase the antioxidant potential of certain foods, including artichokes.

Research Review: Sex Boosts Immunity

German researchers studied 11 volunteers to measure the effect of sexual activity on the immune system. They found that sexual arousal and orgasm caused increases in the total number of white blood cells, especially natural killer cells. An important component of the immune system, natural killer cells protect the body against invading viruses and tumor cells.

Participants in this study used masturbation as the means to sexual arousal and orgasm, but these results correlate to partnered sexual activity as well.

Haake P et al. Effects of sexual arousal on lymphocyte subset circulation and cytokine production in man. *Neuroimmunomodulation*, 11(5):293-8, 2004.

Red Bean Chili With Chocolate

This is an easy stew but requires a few hours to cook. It can be made a day in advance. For a vegetarian version, omit the beef or substitute soy protein or black beans. Contains nightshades.

1 pound lean organic pastured beef, cubed
Sea salt and ground black pepper
1 large onion or 2 small onions
2 garlic cloves, roughly chopped
1 jalapeno pepper, thinly sliced in cross section (remove seeds for a milder flavor)
¼ cup Spicy Chili Powder (recipe follows)
28 oz can whole peeled tomatoes
1 15 oz can kidney beans
2 tbsp cornmeal
1 oz 70% dark chocolate
Plain Greek yogurt to garnish (optional)

Season the beef cubes with sea salt and pepper, then add to a large soup pot. Add water to cover them by one inch, about 4 cups. Bring to a boil, reduce heat to low and simmer, skimming off any foam that rises to the surface. Add onion, garlic, jalapeno and Spicy Chili Powder; continue cooking.

Add can of tomatoes and their juice to a large bowl and use a potato masher or clean hands to roughly crush them. Add about ¾ of this to

the chili, saving the rest for future use. Bring the chili to a boil, then reduce heat to low and simmer until the beef is fork-tender and comes apart easily, about 2 hours, adding boiling water as necessary as the liquid reduces.

Break apart the beef cubes by beating with a wooden spoon inside the pot, or remove them, pull apart the cubes with two forks and return them to the pot.

Stir in the beans and cornmeal, season with black pepper and a pinch of sea salt. Return to a simmer and continue cooking for another hour, stirring occasionally.

Roughly chop the chocolate and stir into the chili. Remove from heat and allow to stand for an hour or more. Just before serving, warm gently over low heat. Taste and adjust seasoning if necessary. Garnish with a dollop of plain yogurt if desired.

Spicy Chili Powder:

2 tbsp chili powder
2 tbsp ground coriander
1 tbsp ground cumin
1 tbsp paprika
1 tbsp ground oregano
1 tbsp garlic powder
1 tsp cayenne
¼ tsp cinnamon

If herbs and spices are not pre-ground, use a coffee grinder or miniature food processor to grind them. Mix to combine.

Cherries in Port Sauce

2 cups port wine
2 cups frozen cherries, thawed, strained, juices reserved
1 cinnamon stick
1 dried chili pepper
1 vanilla bean or ½ tsp vanilla extract
2 tsp potato starch
Plain Greek (or strained) yogurt to serve
Optional: shaved dark chocolate to garnish

Add the port wine, cinnamon stick, chili pepper and vanilla bean (if using) to a sauce pan. Bring to boil, then reduce heat and simmer until reduced by half, about 20 minutes. Add the cherries and vanilla extract (if using) to the port. If making in advance, remove from heat at this point until ready to serve. If the cherry mixture cools to room temperature, store in the fridge.

To finish, in a separate bowl, dissolve potato starch in the reserved cherry juice. Add this mixture to the port and cherries, then heat gently over low heat until mixture bubbles and thickens, stirring frequently. Remove from heat and serve over plain Greek yogurt. Top with shaved dark chocolate if desired (a vegetable peeler works well to shave chocolate).