

CAN EXERCISE HELP YOUR SEX LIFE?

The research is sparse but suggestive.

If the prospect of improved health isn't enough to make you want to start exercising, here's another prospect to consider: Regular workouts might also improve your love life. Studies on the subject are few. But those studies do indicate that moderate aerobic exercise can enhance sexual desire, performance, and satisfaction.

Last year, researchers at the University of California reported a trial involving 95 sedentary middle-aged men who had no apparent sexual problems. The men had enrolled in a program to reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease. They didn't know it was also a study of exercise's impact on sex.

Seventy-eight men were randomly chosen to do supervised aerobic exercise sessions for an hour every other day. They either jogged, rode a stationary bicycle, or ran in place on a trampoline. The control group of 17 men spent the same amount of time walking at a casual pace.

After nine months, the reported frequency of intercourse among the aerobic exercisers had increased from an average of about 9 times a month to 12, and the number of orgasms from about 11 to 14. Those men also reported fewer occasions when they did not reach orgasm, as well as more sexual fantasies. And the more fit the men became, the

more improvement they reported. All those increases were significantly greater than the slight increases that the controls reported.

The reported rates of sexual activity may have been exaggerated; even before the study began, all the men reported higher rates of intercourse than the national average for men their age. But even if they were exaggerating, exercise seemed to have a beneficial effect: Only the aerobic exercisers said that they were having intercourse more often than before.

How's your sex life?

Other evidence that exercise may enhance sexuality comes from surveys. One was presented to the Society for the Scientific Study of Sex in 1988 by Linda De Villers, Ph.D., a psychologist and sex therapist in Santa Monica, Calif. She analyzed 2000 questionnaires submitted by readers of a popular women's fitness magazine. Most of the women reported doing aerobic workouts three or more times a week. Forty percent said that exercising made them more easily aroused; one-third said exercise led to more frequent sexual activity; and one-quarter said it made reaching orgasm easier.

In 1989, Harvard researcher Phillip Whitten, Ph.D., reported findings from

interviews with 160 male and female competitive swimmers, one group in their 40's and another in their 60's. The researchers checked those findings by interviewing the sexual partners of some of the swimmers. Although sexual activity generally declines with age, swimmers in their 40's reported having intercourse at a rate more typical of people in their 20's and 30's. And the swimmers in their 60's were almost as active as the younger swimmers.

Matter or mind?

How might exercise enhance sex? Several physiological explanations have been proposed: a rise in blood levels of the male sex hormone testosterone (possibly even in women); "runner's high," resulting from the release of opium-like hormones called endorphins; and heightened orgasm due to improved muscle tone. But those possibilities are all tenuous.

A more likely explanation is psychological: Studies show that regular exercise tends to boost people's self-confidence and sense of well-being. That may enhance sexuality.

Nine of ten women in De Villers' survey said exercising boosted their "sexual self-confidence." Eight of ten swimmers in Whitten's survey rated themselves as attractive or very attractive; none rated themselves below average. And while the California researchers didn't ask such questions, many of the aerobic exercisers volunteered that they looked and felt better. ■

WORRY/DON'T WORRY

Can beverages break bones?

Caffeine and alcohol may increase the risk of certain fractures, according to a report from the Nurses' Health Study, conducted by Harvard researchers. The report, published in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* in July, analyzed data on nearly 85,000 middle-aged women who completed a dietary questionnaire in 1980. During the next six years, the women suffered a total of about 600 osteoporotic fractures of the forearm and 65 of the hip.

Osteoporotic fractures are breaks caused by a mild impact on thin, weakened bone. Such fractures are an important cause of illness and death from complications (pneumonia and blood clots to the lungs) in older people.

After controlling for other potential risk factors for bone fractures, the researchers found that the women who

consumed the most caffeine (the equivalent of more than four cups of coffee every day) were nearly three times as likely to break a hip as women who consumed little or no caffeine. Compared with women who rarely or never drank alcohol, those who drank the equivalent of at least two and a half shots of liquor every day had about 2.3 times the risk of hip fractures and 1.4 times the risk of forearm fractures.

The researchers cited earlier studies that also seemed to indicate that caffeine might weaken bones, perhaps by increasing the amount of calcium excreted in the urine. And they speculated that alcohol could increase the risk of fractures in two ways: by weakening bone directly and by increasing the chance of falls due to intoxication.

While this single observational study cannot prove a causal connection be-

tween those beverages and fractures, drinking less caffeine and alcohol may make sense, at least for middle-aged and older women, who are at the greatest risk from osteoporosis.

Pop-corn burns

Two New Jersey ophthalmologists recently wrote to the *New England Journal of Medicine* to warn unsuspecting consumers of the hazards of microwave popcorn. Their letter told of a man who, after popping the corn according to directions, "impatiently opened the bag, looking in to see whether all the kernels had popped."

A surge of steam hit his right eye. At the emergency room an hour later, the man learned his right cornea was severely scalded and his 20/20 vision had decreased to 20/50 in that eye. After five days of treatment, he regained normal vision.

The scalding wasn't just a freak accident: The letter recounted similar mishaps involving two other people, including one of the authors. ■