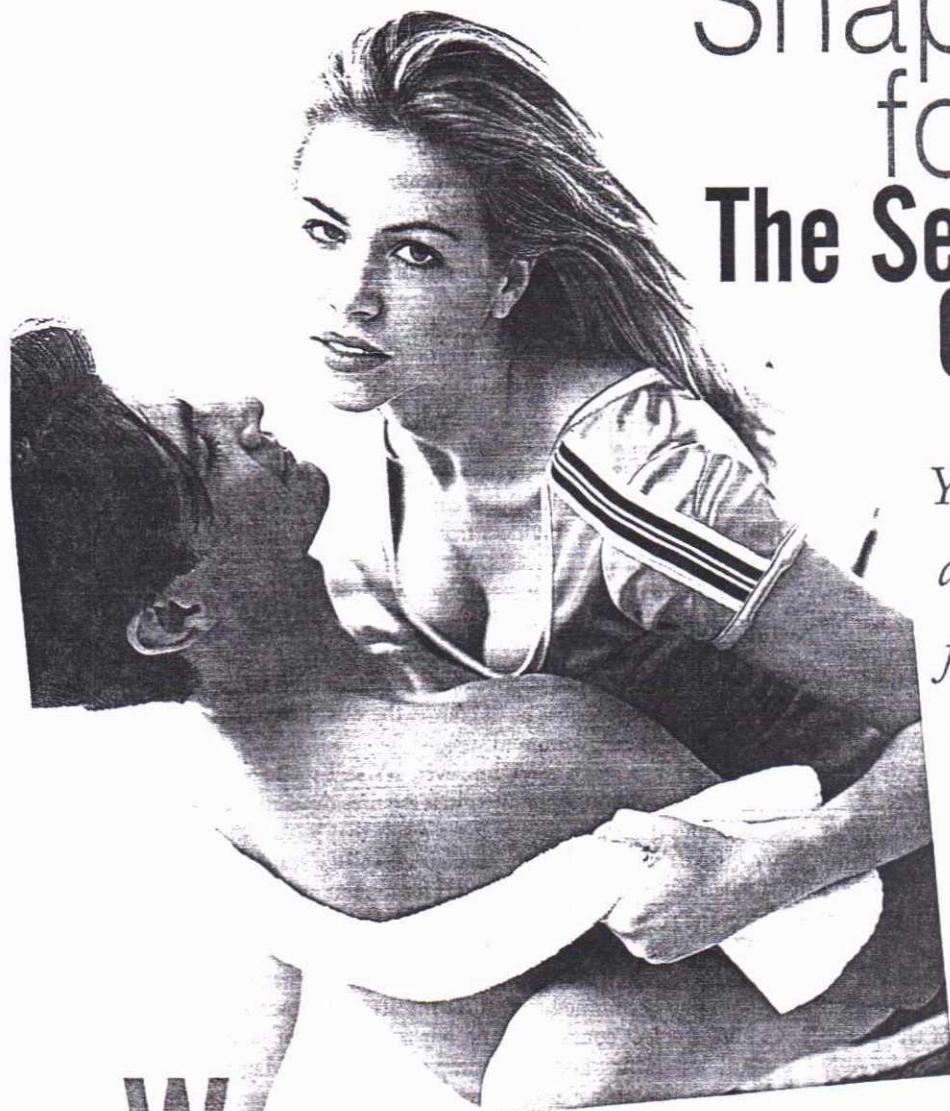


Shaping Up for Love: The Sex-Exercise Connection



Yes, all those reps, steps, and laps are great for your bod, but the real payoff comes when you get physical in the bedroom!

By Marie Farrell

With a sly grin, Jennifer says that since she and her husband, Jack, started exercising together, they can't keep their hands off each other. "We've fallen into this wonderful little routine of working out first thing in the morning," says the twenty-five-year-old mortgage consultant. "Then we shower together and fall into bed to make love before we go to work. It's the best way I can think of to start the day."

Brad, a computer programmer, tells a similar story: Now that his girlfriend, Kimberly, takes aerobics classes three times a week, she not only looks better than ever but initiates sex more often and seems to enjoy it more too.

Both couples have discovered what sex researchers are beginning to document scientifically: Regular exercise, in addition to elevating your mood and preserving your health, can have very *stimulating* effects on your sex life. Over the past few years, a number of studies have concluded that regular workouts enhance nearly every facet of your erotic potential, including desire, sexual confidence, frequency, and the ability to be aroused and achieve orgasm. The benefits last well into old age: In one study, 88 percent of older women who exercise regularly report a high level of enjoyment from sex. Most reported having sex about seven times a month—as often as many married couples in their twenties!

Getting Physical

Intuitively, the connection between exercise and a good sex life makes sense. "Sex is a physical activity, and like any physical activity, the better shape you are in, the better you'll perform," says Mark L. Elliott, director of the Institute for Psychological and Sexual Health in Columbus, Ohio. "Flexibility and conditioning give you more options for sexual positions and ways to have sex, and the more options you have, the more satisfying sex can be."

But beyond improving simple physical skills, exercise exerts subtle but powerful effects upon your body chemistry too. The hormone testosterone, which influences sex drive in both men and women, is known to rise in athletes—whether professional stars or weekend tennis players—when they compete in sporting events. That alone could explain why some women report increased sexual desire immediately following exercise and say they are more aroused.

Endorphins, the opiatelike chemicals produced in the brain that are responsible for the exercise high, may also play a role in sharpening Cupid's arrow. "It's possible that the endorphin high makes you more open to sex, because it makes you feel so good," says Linda De Villers, a Santa Monica psychologist who polled more than eight thousand women

PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFFREY MAYER. STYLING: KELLY LONGHORN. HAIR: ANDREW ANDERSON. MAKEUP: JESSICA ANDERSON. GROOMING: JESSICA ANDERSON. STYLING: KELLY LONGHORN. HAIR: ANDREW ANDERSON. MAKEUP: JESSICA ANDERSON. GROOMING: JESSICA ANDERSON.

about the effects of exercise on libido. "There's also research that suggests the heat generated in muscles by exercise produces a sense of relaxation, and it's possible that this relaxation makes one more receptive to sex."

High Self-Esteem: A Big Turn-On

In addition to the chemical highs induced by exercise, keeping fit can provide an enormous boost to self-esteem. And when you feel better, not only does the world look better, but *you* look better—that is, more *desirable*—to the world. "It's well established that regular exercise can improve one's self-esteem, confidence, and body image," says Elliott. "All these factors are very important for positive sexual interaction. In contrast, couch potatoes, who sit around feeling fat and unattractive, are less likely to initiate sex or respond to initiation. They're going to be more insecure sexually and are not going to function as well. A significant component of sexuality—especially among younger people—is attitude."

High self-esteem and a good body image also contribute to orgasmic capacity by preventing what some sex therapists call spectating. "Spectating is performance anxiety," explains Elliott. "It happens either immediately before or during sex, when a woman begins to worry, 'Oh my God, my stomach looks fat,' or 'My breasts are hanging down unattractively.' She becomes distracted from the touching and the sensuality, and all of a sudden, there's a dramatic reduction in desire, lubrication, and orgasmic capacity. If a woman is uncomfortable with her body, she's less likely to respond sexually."

Spectating occurs differently in women than in men. "Women grow up with a sense that their body is not good enough," says Lonnie Barbach, assistant clinical professor of medicine at the University of California at San Francisco and author of *For Each Other: Sharing Sexual Intimacy*. "Whatever the ideal is at the time—whether small hips, large breasts, or being painfully thin—women strive to change their bodies to fit it. During sex, women's concerns about how they look can take precedence over how they're feeling."

A good antidote to spectating, whether you exercise or not: "Spend a good half hour curiously looking at your nude body from different angles in a mirror," suggests Barbach. "Once you take an honest look at yourself, you can be more reasonable about what you can expect from your body. And you're often more accepting, less fretful about what you look like during sex."

Too Much of a Good Thing

Striving too hard to attain an ideal body image can have other drawbacks too. Just as you can overtrain for any event, too much exercise can actually dampen your sexual fires. Marathoners often report that their libidos vanish during their peak training periods. Compulsive exercisers, including anorexics, typically have little or no sexual activity in their lives. In a study done by Phillip Whitten, editor of *Swim* magazine, both men and women who exercised two to three hours a day six days a week began to see declines in their sexual functioning and interest. Researchers say there's a fine line between the ability of exercise to raise or lower testosterone: In athletes who train too intensively, levels of the sex-drive hormone go down. But many researchers attribute the loss of libido to simple exhaustion. If you work out too much, you have little time or energy for sex... too little time for your partner, period. Even if better sex is not the goal, getting physical with your mate on the playing fields is a great way for dual-career couples to start spending more time together.

Plus, you meet up in the shower after the game—then, *anything* can happen!



Sexercise: Erotic Conditioning

In one study, aerobic conditioning, swimming, and dancing were the three Eros-enhancing activities most often mentioned by participants. One likely reason: They all demand a high energy output, which stimulates the release of endorphins, and they all require an intense body focus. Some women say swimming is one of the ultimate sensual experiences; others consider it a grueling activity that ruins their hair and their makeup. Obviously, just how much a particular activity influences a woman's libido will depend on her specific preferences.

Many women claim, however, that a couple of specific toning exercises can have a salubrious effect on sex. Sheila, an obstetrical nurse, claims she "absolutely bursts into orgasm every time I use the thigh-press machine" at her local gym. Other women find that pelvis-strengthening exercises heighten their genital awareness and increase the kind of flexibility needed for more creative lovemaking.

- One exercise that will increase your stamina and flexibility: Lie on the floor with your knees bent, heels about six inches apart, and lift your buttocks off the floor. Bring your knees together and hold for a count of four. In the same position, turn your hips from side to side to a count of four. Still holding that position, try moving your body up toward your shoulders—you won't be able to, but you'll feel a stretch in the pelvic area—and hold for four. Slowly lower your body as you count to five, stopping an inch above the floor, then lift again. Repeat the cycle ten times.

- Many women claim that Kegel exercises, which strengthen and tone the pubococcygeus muscles surrounding the vagina and anus, have enabled them to become aroused and achieve orgasm more easily. The exercise is simple: Just squeeze the muscles, which are the same ones you use to stop urinating midstream, and hold for a count of five. Or squeeze and relax the muscles five times in a row as rapidly as possible. As with any exercises, doing too much too soon may cause soreness, but gradually, you should work up to one hundred to one hundred and fifty repetitions a day. The exercises can be done anywhere—while waiting in line or sitting at your desk. Devotees claim they result in more intense sensations.