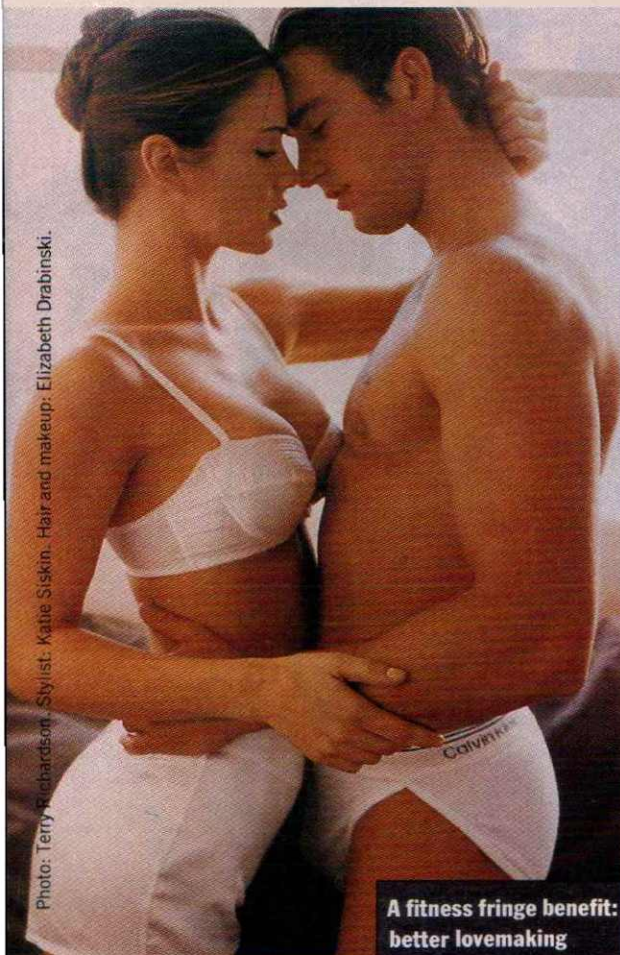


losing sexual hang-ups

By Sara Nelson

Why exercise often has a "tremendous impact"

Photo: Terry Richardson. Stylist: Katie Siskin. Hair and makeup: Elizabeth Drabinski.



A fitness fringe benefit: better lovemaking

When Lydia Roberts's husband gave her a pink lace unitard last Valentine's Day, she refused to put it on. "My thighs were so flabby and my tummy so saggy that the thought of parading around in a unitard made me want to cry. It hardly got me in the mood for sex, which in those days was more of a make-sure-the-lights-stayed-off sort of event."

But now Lydia—well into a thrice-

weekly personal training program at the local gym—sees that piece of pink lace as a symbol of her success. "Now that my thighs are toned and my stomach's flatter, I really like wearing the unitard," she says. "Some nights I'll put it on when I want to make love—and often I'm the one to suggest we leave the lights on. I'm also much more willing to try out new positions because I'm not worrying about how I look."

How a woman feels about her body often affects how she feels about sex. If she thinks her body looks lousy, she'd rather not share it. But if she starts exercising, her attitude often changes. One Harvard University study of 160 swimmers found that "those who swam regularly had a significant improvement in their sex lives, not only in frequency but also in enjoyment," reports Phillip Whitten, Ed.D., a research associate at Harvard. A probable reason is that the swimmers liked how they looked: 80 percent of the subjects rated themselves more physically attractive than their peers.

Adds Linda De Villers, Ph.D., a Santa Monica-based psychologist, "Working out has a tremendous impact. It gives you a sense of well-being and makes you feel that your body is an ally rather than an enemy." Women report that this new "alliance" frees them to enjoy sex more. "Before I started working out," Lydia says, "I never liked being on top because my stomach stuck out and my thighs spread. But now I feel confident enough about my muscle tone to do it."

"My whole feeling about my sexuality changes when I'm in shape," says Karen Karlson, a 32-year-old teacher whose weight hardly fluctuates but whose exer-

cise habits do. "When I feel trim, I feel sexier, which makes me much more likely to wear revealing lingerie or undress slowly in front of my boyfriend. If I'm not in shape, I don't like him to spend too much time looking at my body."

Karen's boyfriend, Dale, agrees that she's less inhibited when she's feeling good about herself. "I always think she looks beautiful, and I usually don't know what she's talking about when she points to some "flawed" part of her body.

But I encourage her to go to the gym anyway because now she's less critical of herself and initiates sex more."

Besides, being fit has physical as well as psychosexual advantages. The increased strength in the abs and quads that develops from regular workouts may help a woman to lift her pelvis higher during missionary-position sex, increasing clitoral stimulation and the likelihood of orgasm. And 27 percent of Dr. De Villers's female patients report an increase in their ability to climax when they have better muscle tone and less fat. "This may be because they're more at home with their bodies, but I also think toned muscles and aerobic endurance contribute to greater sexual stamina," she explains. "Also, because orgasm involves the rushing of blood to the genital area, someone with better circulation—also a by-product of regular exercise—will have better sex."

Ironically, some women avoid exercise for just this reason. "Some women have an abiding fear of liking sex too much," says Judith Seifer, Ph.D., associate clinical professor of psychiatry and obstetrics/gynecology at Wright State University School of Medicine in Dayton, Ohio. "Subconsciously they think, 'if I lose this last little bit of cellulite on my thighs, I might get comfortable taking off my clothes—and then I might want to do 'it' all the time.'"

Other women use exercise to avoid sex. They work out so long or so often that they're too exhausted to make love. But most women find that even if better sex is not the goal of their workouts, it can certainly be a happy side effect. "At first I sort of resented the time she spent at the gym," says one man whose wife began exercising religiously three years ago. "But it wasn't long before I started to like the results. Now, not only has she stopped saying, 'Honey, do I look fat?', she's also begun dressing—and acting—like the beautiful, sexy woman I always believed she was." □