

The beauty power of orgasm

There are many thoroughly painless ways to make good looks better—from a decent night's sleep to a luxurious spa visit. But who would have thought that the purest form of pleasure—orgasm—could have such a positive effect on a woman's health and appearance? Truth is, no matter how it's reached (with a partner or through self-stimulation), orgasm brings on more than that fabled glow.

Getting Physical

Although the topic is no longer so taboo, there still may be confusion about what actually happens during orgasm—some women may even wonder whether or not they've had one. It is often described as a physical sensation: namely, contractions in the vagina and pelvic region. But it can be characterized in psychological terms, too—compared to riding the crest of a wave, for example, or feeling the earth move. "Essentially," explains Mark L. Elliott, Ph.D., clinical director of the Masters and Johnson Institute, the renowned sex research and treatment center, "orgasm is a combined physiological and psychological reaction stemming from sexual stimuli experienced by both the brain and the body."

According to the Masters and Johnson theory, women go through three distinct levels of sexual response. First there is a heightened sensual awareness radiating from the clitoris, experi-

enced either as a slowly escalating arousal or as a sudden, almost shocklike sensation. Next, as excitement grows, muscles contract and heartbeat and respiration increase. Warmth spreads outward from the genital area. Ultimately, a series of contractions takes place, accompanied by a release of tension that begins in the clitoris, vagina and pelvis and flows throughout the body.

West Los Angeles sex researcher Linda DeVillers, Ph.D., believes that there's a biological basis for orgasm: "The clitoris's sole function is to provide pleasure," she points out—and this, by making sex so attractive, encourages reproductive activity.

The Look of Love

The benefits of orgasm are much more than a biological reward for making love, however. Some experts feel that energetic sex may be a form of aerobic exercise. According to New York sex therapist Betty Dodson, the elevated heart rate and faster breathing promote cardiovascular conditioning, and the boost in circulation results in a facial flush—hence, The Glow. Overall body tone is also improved. "Muscle tissues relax, becoming warm and limber," says New York sex counselor Erica Goodstone, Ph.D. "And the contractions of orgasm increase blood flow."

It's not surprising that there's a powerful reciprocal effect: "If you're healthy and in good shape,

you may climax more easily," says DeVillers. Orgasms also tend to be more intense and fulfilling, perhaps because people who exercise regularly take pride in their bodies and have higher self-esteem. (It's harder to have an orgasm if you're preoccupied with the size of your thighs.) In addition, being in good physical condition supplies more stamina in—and out of—bed.

Aside from the physical benefits, orgasm also plays a key role in helping to maintain emotional stability. "The pleasure you get is carried over into daily life," says Los Angeles psychologist Stella Resnick, Ph.D., "manifesting itself in a general feeling of well-being." That contentment shows in your face. Biology also comes into play: "The changes in the brain during orgasm take place in the area associated with emotions," explains DeVillers. They work to reduce irritability, too. After orgasm, you feel deeply relaxed, and a period of more restful than usual sleep often follows. In fact, DeVillers points out, sex therapists frequently prescribe self-stimulation as a cure for insomnia.

To Your Health

So much for the "Not tonight, dear, I have a headache" excuse: Doctors now credit orgasm's ability to ease tension with relieving that annoying pain; it's also thought that vaginal and pelvic contrac- (continued on page 240)

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tions can actually soothe severe menstrual cramps.

Another benefit: Orgasm seems to protect women against vaginal problems. The Masters and Johnson Institute discovered that women who chronically become aroused, but don't climax, are especially susceptible to yeast infections. The reason? During sex, blood collects in the pelvic area to aid in lubrication, altering the pH level and raising the temperature of the vagina. Orgasm relieves that congestion by releasing blood from the area; if climax *doesn't* occur and the pH imbalance remains, it may result in an increase of harmful yeast.

The Numbers Game

Once a day... once a week... once a month? Exactly how often does one need to experience orgasm in order to reap its inherent beauty and health benefits? Although it's hard to quantify, the late Wilhelm Reich, noted sex expert and protégé of Freud, prescribed three per week—which happens to coincide nicely with the general recommendation for aerobic exercise. But most people agree: You can't have too much of a good thing. □

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