

Q & A - SEXUAL MARITAL FAMILY CLINICAL

Sexual activity prevents vaginal atrophy

Q Is there any value to the old wives' tale that sperm is "good" for a postmenopausal woman's vaginal mucosa?

A There are no data that support the statement that sperm is beneficial for the maintenance of vaginal health in the postmenopausal woman. There is evidence, however, to support the recommendation to older women that an ongoing sexual relationship helps maintain and restore the vaginal mucosa that is deprived of estrogen stimulation. In a study done at Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, we found (1) that postmenopausal women who continued to be coitally active had less overall vaginal atrophy than inactive women and (2) that the frequency of masturbation and coital activity correlated negatively with vaginal atrophy ($P=.022$). These observations indicate that sexual activity correlates positively with better vaginal health in postmenopausal women who are not taking hormone replacement therapy.¹ In 1966 Masters and Johnson also reported that ongoing sexual activity correlated with considerably better vaginal lubrication in older women when compared to those women who were sexually inactive.² Other investigators found that a continued active sexual life is beneficial in the preserving of vaginal elasticity and in the prevention of dyspar-

eunia.^{3,4} Although the cause and effect relationships of these associations have not been clearly shown, I believe these issues should be discussed with older women when they receive sexual counseling.

References

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Effects of exercise on women's sexuality

Q Does regular physical exercise have specific effects on women's sexuality?

A Yes. A 1987 national survey of 8,145 women found that regular physical exercise can have salutary effects on women's sexuality. Over three-fourths of the subjects, readers of a fitness magazine, had been exer-

cising three months or more, at least three times a week, with 62% of the women exercising 30-60 minutes per session.

A full 89% of the women reported an increase in sexual confidence since beginning their exercise program, and 31% reported an increase in the frequency of sexual activity with their partner; only 7% reported a decrease. Forty percent reported an increase in their ability to be aroused since beginning to exercise regularly, while 27% reported an increase in their ability to climax. Less than 3% reported decreases in these areas.

Moderation is the key to enhancing sexual functioning. Although this study did not directly address the effects of compulsive exercise on women's sexuality, the result of a small scale study of men would suggest a curvilinear relationship between regular exercise and sexuality. At rigid, compulsive levels, exercise is likely to be associated with decreased sexual interest and activity.

Bibliography

De Villers L: Body image, exercise, and women's sexuality. Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sex, November 13, 1988, San Francisco, CA.

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