

Shape Up Your Sex Life

Working out is the key to good health,
but that's not the only payoff

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AT PARTIES they like to flirt – with each other. Arms entwined, their body language says “passionate affair,” not “married with children.” You’d never guess that Tom and Sue Anderson are in their early 40s and have been married 17 years.

A dozen years ago, their marriage was solid, but stale. Sex was pleasant, but a little predictable.

Then, after their second child was born, Sue began an exercise program. As her figure improved, she felt more energetic and attractive. Impressed, Tom started running and working out and lost 60 pounds.

Now exercise is a favourite pastime. And while they’ve been taking

inches off at the club, romance has been taking off in their bedroom. As Sue puts it, “Sex is all brand-new.”

Common sense says that when you’re feeling fit and attractive, intimacy is more appealing. But experts point to a host of physiological changes that might explain the “sexual second wind” that comes with moderate physical exertion. “Every system in the body works better when we’re in shape,” says Loren Cordain, professor of exercise physiology at Colorado State University.

A growing number of studies and surveys support the “sexercise” connection. Linda De Villers, a psychologist in Santa Monica, Calif., analyzed 2000 responses to a ques-

tionnaire in a women's fitness magazine and found that 83 percent of the women polled engaged in aerobic activity at least three times a week. Forty percent said that, compared to how they felt before beginning an exercise program, they were more easily aroused; 31 percent said they had sex more often, and 25 percent reported climaxes came more easily.

Almost any aerobic exercise can produce benefits in the bedroom. In another poll, 66 percent of men and women runners claimed running made them better lovers. And two thirds of those responding to a survey of bicycle enthusiasts also said cycling made them better lovers.

Best of all, the payoff can come at any time in life. Reporting on his Harvard University study of middle-aged swimmers, anthropologist Phillip Whitten concludes, "We found the sex lives of women and men over 40 who exercised regularly were similar to those of many people in their late 20s and early 30s."

Experts are still debating why workouts prime us for passion. Some believe they may simply increase fitness. "People who exercise have more stamina," says Dr. Richard C. Reznichek, a Torrance, Calif., urologist and sex therapist. Studies show that even moderate exercise — three one-hour sessions a week — can increase flexibility and strength, making you more limber in the bedroom.

Regular exercise may also boost sex by warding off the blues. Some scientists suggest that endorphins, released during exercise, may be mood

elevating. These "happy hormones" are naturally occurring opiates in the body, explains Dr. Jay S. Schinfeld, a Philadelphia reproductive endocrinologist. In some people they kick in after about three kilometres of running or the equivalent, and their effects can be felt for up to three hours.

Other researchers point to the cholesterol connection. Men who increase their levels of HDL cholesterol may over time unclog arteries and increase blood flow throughout the body — including the pelvic region and sex organ. "A low blood supply reduces male erectile ability," says James R. White, an exercise physiologist and coauthor of a study of the effects of exercise on sedentary men at the University of California, San Diego.

Along with healthier hearts, married men and women who exercise develop a better self-image. Most of the women in De Villers's survey reported a significant jump in sexual confidence with regular workouts. And swimmers of both sexes in the Harvard study reported that they felt more attractive and had an increase in desire and satisfaction after several months of exercising.

"When you care about your figure, you begin to love yourself more," explains Marjorie Schulte, director of the Schulte Institute for Psychotherapy and Human Sexuality in Scottsdale, Ariz.

WHAT'S the "right" amount of exercise? Luckily, a sexual boost can come with a reasonable amount of

effort, while very rigorous exercise can cause fatigue and dampen desire. De Villers, who has created exercise programs for couples, suggests these tips for a sexual jump start:

- Choose an activity you'll enjoy, not simply endure. Swimming, running, cycling and aerobics are among the best.

- Tune in to the sensual aspects of exercise. "Workouts can be arousing – they warm up parts of the body you may not have paid attention to before," De Villers says.

- If your time together is limited, work out with your spouse. "Joint exercise can spark desire, as long as you're not competing with each other," she says.

- Don't expect instant gratification. To get the most out of life – including sexuality – experts recommend heeding all the basic principles of good health and fitness.

"Anyone who exercises and eats well will feel better and can have an abundant sex life," says White.

Beau Geste-ure

I HAD planted sunflower seeds in a straight, long row along the back of our yard. The next year they came up again, although the birds had scattered the seeds, causing clumps in spots and single flowers here and there.

One evening I wandered to the backyard. As the sun went down over the golden barley in the farmer's field behind us, I saw the top of a sunflower plant growing up through the grain. I looked at it every evening after that. It grew very tall very fast, and soon the big yellow sunflower bloomed, its head bowed from its own weight. As summer wore on, I knew the farmer would soon be harvesting the barley, and the flower would be cut down by the combine. And then I awoke one August morning to the unmistakable sound of the tractor.

Later I took a slow walk to the back. I could see the field with its fresh haircut. As I got closer, I saw it – in the middle of the field, standing tall among the scattered barley – the sunflower! The farmer had manoeuvred his huge tractor around it and left it standing in the field.

– Contributed by Roz Maurice

A Dog's Life. During a tour of the Scottish Highlands, my wife and I booked into a guesthouse for dinner, bed and breakfast. The landlady made us very welcome and asked if we had any likes or dislikes about food. We assured her we were not fussy. "Do ye like porridge?" she asked.

"Yes," said my wife, "but please don't bother to make it specially."

"Ach," said she, "it's nae bother. Ah've tae mak it for the dog, anyway."

– Contributed by Andy McQueen in a letter to *TV Times*, England