

Fit for SEX

WE ALL KNOW THAT WORKING OUT IS THE KEY TO GOOD HEALTH, BUT THAT'S NOT THE ONLY PAYOFF. ACCORDING TO THE LATEST STUDIES, EXERCISE BOOSTS YOUR LIBIDO AND MAKES YOU A BETTER LOVER. **BY BETH HOWARD**



He puts his hand on her thigh and she winks. At parties they like to flirt—with each other. You'd never guess that Tom, 33, and Sue, 30, have been together for seven years. Arms entwined, their body language says "passionate affair," not "married with children."

No one is more surprised by their revival of romance than this Chicago couple. A few years ago, their marriage was solid, but stale. Sex was pleasant, but a little predictable.

After their second child was born, Sue joined an exercise studio where she took, then taught, aerobics classes. As her figure improved, she began to feel more energetic and attractive. Tom, impressed by her transformation, started jogging, lost ten pounds, and signed up for his wife's classes.

Now exercise has become one of the couple's favorite pastimes. And for good reason: While they've been taking off inches at the gym, romance has been taking off in the 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 may explain the "sexual second wind" that comes with physical exertion.

"Humans are designed to be active," says Loren Cordain, Ph.D., associate professor of exercise physiology at Colorado State University in

Fort Collins. "Every system in the body works better when we're in shape."

LOVE WARM-UPS

If working out turns you on, you're not alone, says Linda De Villers, Ph.D., a sex therapist and psychologist in Santa Monica, California. Her recent national survey of 8,000 women stands as the most ambitious exploration of the relationship between fitness and sex to date. Among those Dr. De Villers polled, 83 percent had engaged in some form of aerobic activity at least three times a week for a minimum of three months; of those, 25 percent reported sexual desire increased after workouts.

More profound, however, were the changes in lovemaking, says Dr. De Villers. Forty percent said they were more easily aroused, 31 percent said they had sex more often, more than 25 percent reported climaxes came faster, and 5 percent said orgasms intensified.

A growing number of studies confirm the connection between exercise and sex. Researchers at the University of California at San Diego (UCSD) put 95 sedentary men on a program of vigorous exercise. After nine months, nearly 80 percent made love more frequently. The men also reported having more satisfying foreplay, fantasies, and orgasms.

Middle-aged swimmers are more sexually active and enjoy lovemaking more than their nonexercising peers, reports a Harvard University study. "The sex lives of women and men over forty who exercise regularly are similar to those of people in their late twenties and early thirties," concludes Phillip Whitten, Ph.D., an anthropologist at Harvard.

Best of all, a sexual boost comes with relatively little effort. Swimmers in the Harvard study reported an increase in desire after three 45-minute workouts a week.

Almost any aerobic exercise can produce benefits in the bedroom. In a recent runners poll, 83 percent of the women and 75 percent of men claimed running improved their sex lives. And two thirds of the cyclists in a national survey said cycling made them better lovers.

THE SEXUAL BUZZ

Exercise is fast becoming a favored form of foreplay, but experts are still debating the phenomenon's physiological basis.

Workouts may prime you for passion simply because you're more physically fit. Eighty-one percent of the cyclists surveyed said sexual vigor increased with fitness. "People who exercise simply have more stamina," says Richard C. Reznichuk, M.D., a urologist and sex therapist in Los Angeles.

Indirectly, exercise may boost sex by warding off the blues. "In (continued)

interested in sex," says Marjorie Schulte, sex therapist and director of the Schulte Institute for Psychotherapy and Human Sexuality in Scottsdale, Arizona. "Exercising and feeling good about yourself stimulate sexual desire."

Mood-elevating beta-endorphins, released during exercise, are often credited for a leap in sexual desire and heightened arousal. Endorphins ("happy hormones") are a naturally occurring opiate and part of the body's response to fight-or-flight situations, explains Jay S. Schinfeld, M.D., a Philadelphia endocrinologist. Endorphins help to calm the body, allowing it to function under stress, including the healthy stress of working out.

For most people, endorphins kick in after about two miles of running or the equivalent, says Dr. Schinfeld. That could take as little as 10 minutes or up to an hour, depending on the intensity of the exercise. "Fifteen to 25 minutes is average," he says. And the harder you push, the longer the positive rush lasts—it can go as long as three hours, allowing ample time for postworkout intimacy.

Other researchers point to testosterone as a key factor: Studies have shown that levels increase with exercise. "This hormone stimulates parts of the brain in women and men that are associated with sexual arousal," says David P. McWhirter, M.D., another coauthor of the UCSD study. And that, he says, translates into sexual desire. However, David R. Jacobs, M.D., chief of endocrinology at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City, disagrees: "A testosterone increase might last less than an hour. That may not be long enough to affect sex."

The cholesterol-exercise-sex connection is less controversial. Men in the UCSD study who reduced their fat intake and exercised lowered their ratio of "bad" to "good" cholesterol. Possibly this made it easier for them to maintain erections because lowering bad cholesterol levels may unclog arteries and increase the flow of blood throughout the body (including the pelvic region and sexual organs). "A low blood supply," says James R. White, M.D., a coauthor of the UCSD study on sedentary men, "reduces male sexual ability."

In theory, high levels of bad cholesterol could affect women too. "It's certainly a factor for both sexes," White says. "Quite a few women who have hardened arteries have less vaginal blood flow, do not lubricate well, and as a result may be inhibited sexually."

It will take more research to confirm all the forces behind enhanced sexuality. "The biochemical systems in the body are all connected, but exactly how everything works together is still a mystery," says Dr. McWhirter. "So far, no one has been able to completely isolate one system and say, 'This is definitely it!'"

Fit For Sex

BODY AND SOUL

Along with bigger biceps and healthier hearts, men and women who exercise develop a better self-image. This psychological change compellingly explains why sex is better with exercise.

The women in Dr. De Villers's study reported an enormous jump in self—and sexual—confidence with regular workouts. Exercise pampers your body; in fact, it's a lot like parenting a child, says Dr. Schulte. "When you care about your figure, you begin to love it and yourself more," she explains. "And so it's natural to feel more desirable."

The psychological exercise boon may have a stronger effect on women. In a study of 400 marathoners, more women than men said running had a positive effect on their self-image.

People who exercise obviously feel more attractive and, therefore, may be more open to amorous adventures. When the participants of the Harvard study were asked to rate themselves in terms of physical attractiveness, 80 percent checked above average. "These are people who feel good about the way they look physically. That can have a pretty positive effect on sex," says Dr. Whitten.

Does an ego boost lead to erotic risk-taking? A study of 115 middle-aged men who began to exercise regularly reported an increase in extramarital affairs. Fourteen percent of the cyclists who responded to a recent poll reported having had sex when they stopped for a rest during a ride. And Fred Lebow, director of the New York City Marathon, recalls a Florida race when a male runner fell for a female runner. His attraction—and abandon—was obviously returned. The two dived behind some roadside bushes, made love, dashed back into the race, and crossed the finish line.

THERE'S A LIMIT

Researchers warn there's a definite boundary to the punch that exercise lends to passion. Overexercising can backfire, dampening sexual desire and even disrupting reproductive cycles.

According to Dr. Schinfeld, women who exercise too much can experience amenorrhea, the temporary absence of menstruation. A common problem for

overtrained female athletes, it can limit estrogen production. The potential result: vaginal dryness and inhibited orgasm.

Erica, a 27-year-old actress, remembers that while training with her college cross- (continued on page 58)

Get Physical

Fitness in moderation is the first step toward better sex, says Dr.

De Villers, who created Love Skills, an exercise program for couples in Santa Monica. She suggests these tips for a sexual jump-start:

- Choose an aerobic activity—swimming, running, cycling, or high- and low-impact aerobics classes. A good cardiovascular workout triggers hormonal and biological changes that can lead to better sex.
- Find an exercise you'll enjoy, not simply endure.
- Don't expect instant gratification. Many changes linked to sex happen over time.
- Tune into the sensual aspects of exercise. "Workouts can be arousing—they warm up parts of the

body you may not have paid attention to before," says Dr. De Villers. "And a heightened awareness of new sensations enhances a move from the locker room to the bedroom."

• If your time together is limited, work out with your partner. "Joint exercise can spark desire," says Dr. De Villers. But she admits this approach isn't for everyone. One couple became so competitive they had to stop playing tennis together.

Exercise, of course, isn't magic. 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 good and have an abundant and generous sex life," says Dr. White. —B.H.