

turn-ons

Researchers who study interpersonal attraction and arousal have discovered some very surprising tantalizers.

By Colleen Dunn Bates

You know what turns you on. You may even know what turns on your mate. But do you know what scientific research has discovered about what arouses you? Would you believe that pumpkin pie and power suits create some very intense sparks? Exercise, as you probably know, heightens arousal. And women sometimes are physiologically turned on without realizing it. We've uncovered a few more unforeseen tantalizers — and with Valentine's Day around the corner, it couldn't be a more fitting time to learn what scintillates the both of you.

*Illustrations
by
Maira
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Next time you're planning to dab a little Obsession behind your ears, consider substituting a few doughnut crumbs instead. A recent study monitoring the effects of aromas on male arousal (signified by blood flow to the penis) had unexpected results. "Commercial perfumes produced only a 3 to 4 percent increase in penile blood flow, compared to 40 percent for a blend of doughnut and black licorice," says study head Alan R. Hirsch, M.D., director of the Smell & Taste Treatment and Research Foundation Ltd. in Chicago.

The aromas that proved to be the biggest turn-ons were a mixture of lavender and pumpkin pie, pumpkin pie and doughnut, and doughnut and black licorice. Although his research team doesn't know why these sweet smells got the men aroused, Hirsch theorizes that the reason is rooted in evolution. "Our ancestors would gather at food kills, where they had the best chance of meeting a mate." (Ironically, when the smell of roasting meat was tested, the men didn't respond nearly as strongly as they did to the dessert scents.)

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terone levels in women rose after drinking, especially when they were ovulating. A heightened testosterone level is linked with increased arousal in women.

But other studies showed a decrease in physiological signs of arousal after drinking, even in women who reported that they felt more turned on. "A small amount of alcohol may lift inhibitions, and having a drink is a social cue for attraction, along with dimming lights and music," says McCormick. "The problem with recommending it is that too many people have trouble with setting limits — and drinking a lot [can cause] sexual dysfunction."

But they knew that back in the 16th century: "It provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance," Shakespeare warned in *Macbeth*.

Mind-Body Heat

"The best erotica for men and women is imagination," says McCormick.

The difficulty can come in putting it to work. "We all process information differently," she says. "So imagi-



nation varies for people who are visual, or verbal or tactile." The secret is to discover how you process your imagination, and then tune in to what turns you on. "If you're verbal, know that it's the words that work for you. You can read a romance novel. Most of them are pretty hot

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these days," McCormick says. "If you're visual, watch a video or even better, use your brain to think of visual images." Tactile people can use the sense of touch in fantasies: imagining for example, the sensations of a

foot massage or a skinny dip on a moonlit night. ■

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lishers, 1994), the main reason women block out these clear signs of physical arousal is developmental. "It starts in childhood, when girls are taught that their genitals are dirty," she says. "Secondly, we're told that we're not supposed to be hot to trot."

Clothes Make You Make the Man

What gets an educated woman more excited: a macho man in blue-collar duds or a stuffed shirt in a designer suit?

Women may claim to be turned on by handsome guys in hard hats, but in three studies conducted in 1990 and 1993 at Syracuse University, anthropology Professor John Townsend, Ph.D., discovered that women are reluctant to date, marry or sleep "down" from their own particular status. "We found that the dweeby guy in the blazer and Rolex was more attractive to college-educated women than the handsome guy in low-status clothes," he says. "The women say they'll go out with a construction worker, but then they really won't."

Social psychologists confirm Townsend's findings. David M. Buss, Ph.D., author of *The Evolution of Desire* (HarperCollins, 1994), studied the mating game in 37 countries and found that a man's wardrobe was the most significant component of his attractiveness to women. Nice suits symbolize higher incomes, and the reason women choose them also is rooted in evolution. "Evolutionary speaking, women are looking for men who can acquire resources and protect them, even if they don't really need that protection anymore," Buss says. "Women are attracted to men who look like they can bring home the bacon."

Love Potion No. 100 Proof

Opinion is divided over whether alcohol is a turn-on for women. One study, reported in *Scientific American* in 1994, showed that testos-



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Another theory involves scent and memory. "It could be a direct Pavlovian response that recalls a man's wife or girlfriend, or an olfactory-evoked nostalgic memory from childhood," Hirsch says. "We know that there is a direct connection between the olfactory bulb at the top of the nose and the septal nucleus, which is the brain's erection center. It could be that the aromas are simply triggering the septal nucleus."

Next year he'll be conducting the same tests on women, and based on his evolutionary theory, he expects women to be turned on by the same sweet, homey aromas.

Exercise Electricity

Just do it, indeed. Not only does regular exercise improve your heart, your mood and your jeans size, but it can help to sexually stimulate you, too. Linda De Villers, Ph.D., a sex therapist and professor of psychology at Pepperdine University in Culver City, Calif., surveyed the link between fitness and sex in 8,000 women. She found that 25 percent of those who got aerobic exercise at least three times a week reported an increase in sexual arousal shortly after their workouts. Over the long term, 40 percent of the regular exercisers were more easily aroused, 31 percent had sex more often, and 26 percent climaxed faster. "Much of the short-term benefit is the physiological boost after exercise that changes your mood," speculates De Villers. "The

Research has proven that we're aroused by power suits and odor of doughnut. But we wondered what people responded to outside the lab. So we conducted a completely unscientific "study": We simply asked men and women what turns them on. Here's what they said. By Dana Silbiger

She said:

"Guys who don't primp and preen."

"I'm one of those power-suit women."

"A butt in a pair of jeans."

"Drakkar cologne just drives me berserk."

"Long hair and stringed instruments."

"Rain."

"A full moon."

"Torn, faded jeans."

"Long, slow kisses."

"Chests."

"Really tan, strong hands. Yeah."

"The smell of Bold detergent."

"A great smile with tiny dimples on the side."

"A deep voice."

"A cyclist's muscular legs."

"A tan man in Ray-Bans, with one hand on the steering wheel and the wind blowing his hair."

"Watching a man play with little kids."

"A good dancer."

"Football players."

"A guy in boxers."

He said:

"Nice skin."

"Hair, voices, necks, eyes, ears, shoulders, arms, hands, breasts, backs, stomachs, butts, thighs, knees, calves, backs of knees, shins, feet, toes, heels . . . have I left anything out?"

"Babies. I guess men have a biological clock, too, because the idea of making a baby makes me want to . . . uh . . . make a baby."

"Eye contact."

"Laughing at my jokes."

"Confidence, but understated."

"The occasional tight shirt."

"A body that says strength, but in a feminine way."

"The small of the back."

"Bare midsections."

"Runs in hose."

"Intelligence."

"A good dancer."

"Women in dresses."

"Women wearing men's clothing — like my shirt or jacket, with the arms too long and flopping."

"Meeting someone for the first time."

"Being seduced."

"Kissing."

"Getting her really turned on."

long-term benefit may be because when people exercise, they start to feel good about themselves. That helps feelings of sexuality."

The Mind Says No, the Body Says Yes

Plenty of women find graphic sexual images to be more of a turnoff than anything else. So the results of a recent study conducted at the University of Amsterdam may surprise you.

One group of women watched an explicitly pornographic film, the male-oriented piston-and-rod variety. A second group watched a sexually graphic film directed by a woman, which featured more gentle scenes of eroticism. Members of the first group said they were repelled and offended by the film's content, but tests measuring their genital blood flow showed them to be physiologically turned on. In fact, they were every bit as aroused as the women who watched the second film.

According to Naomi McCormick, Ph.D., president of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sex, professor of psychology at State University of New York at Plattsburgh and author of *Sexual Salvations: Affirming Women's Sexual Rights and Pleasures* (Prager Pub-

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