



HEALTH BY BETH LIVERMORE

Why Walkers Make Better Lovers

The least-discussed joys of walking

ONE OF THE GREAT THINGS about walking is the way it brings you so close to nature—the fresh air, sounds of birds, colorful leaves, primal urges. Primal urges? Yes. Walking can be an aphrodisiac that primes both mind and body for, well, you know. Indeed, the carnal benefit of exercise is fast becoming a fact of life as more researchers dare to lift the curtain of privacy on this topic. Surveys show that regular exercise can boost libido, maintain prowess, and for some, be enough to ignite the ruby-red fires of passion.

Feelings of love. “After a day of skiing or swimming, I often found myself more interested in sex,” says sex therapist Linda De Villers, Ph.D., of Santa Monica, Calif. However, De Villers’ heightened arousal contradicted the commonly held belief that exercise reduces desire because it is tiring.

“I wanted to know what was true for most people,” De Villers says. So she surveyed more than 8,000 women, all of whom did some kind of aerobic activity at least three times a week for no less than three months. The results were a strong endorsement for starting an exercise regimen. Twenty-five percent of the women said they felt frisky after workouts. A full 40% said that with regular exercise they were generally more sexually responsive. In addition, 31% claimed to have sex more often, more than 25% climaxed quicker, and 5% experienced more-intense orgasms when they exercised routinely.

In another study, Eric Gronbech, Ph.D., of Chicago State University, went right to the source. Gronbech asked 500 women who participated in aerobic dance, calisthenic, or weight-training classes if exercise packed erotic potential. To his surprise, 17% said

they felt sexually aroused during workouts, and 7% had experienced spontaneous orgasms during exercise. Gronbech had heard that this occurred.

“But,” he says, “I had no idea that it was so common!”

Men like it, too. The link between sex and exercise benefits men as well as women. Moderate exercise appears to make men more virile. James White, Ph.D., of the University of California, San Diego, interviewed 78 men after they followed a moderate aerobic regimen four times per week for nine months. In that time, the men’s rate of sexual intercourse leaped an average of 30%, with 26% more orgasms. In addition, they reported having better fantasies and foreplay and experiencing fewer “erectile failures.”

A regular swimmer, Harvard anthropologist Phillip Whitten had heard the stories—fit older men and women claiming the sexual prowess of youngsters—and started wondering about his own future. “As I approached middle age, I was interested in what life had in store for



me. I wondered if research would bear out anecdote," he says.

After studying a group of swimmers, Whitten found that it did. "The sex lives of both men and women over 40 who exercise regularly are similar in frequency and satisfaction to those of people in their late 20s and early 30s."

The facts of life. So what's going on that helps you get it on? Part of the answer is simple physiology. "Sexual functioning is a total-body response," says sex therapist Jo Marie Kessler, R.N.P. of San Diego. It requires endurance, strength, and flexibility—especially for the more gymnastic among us—all of which improve with regular exercise. Further, Kessler says, exercise develops muscles. Increased muscle tone means stronger contractions; stronger contractions mean more sensation. And if you keep the nerves and blood vessels that power your sexual life in top form, your pleasure quotient is bound to go up.

"The same fitness routine that keeps your heart healthy and your cholesterol levels low can help you to maintain your sexual function," says Ken Goldberg, M.D., founder of the Male Health Center in Dallas. For example, "erection is a blood vessel event," Goldberg says. Women need adequate blood flow to the pelvis region for lubrication. So anything you can do to protect the pipes, including regular exercise, will enhance sexual longevity.

Finally, exercise appears to serve up a potent cocktail of pleasure hormones. "It increases the flow of adrenalin and endorphins, which are important to men and women during arousal," says Jay S. Schinfeld, M.D., chief of reproductive endocrinology and infertility at Abington Memorial Hospital in Pennsylvania. Moderate exercise also boosts the male sex hormone testosterone in both genders. Increased testosterone is thought to stimulate sexual desire.

Mental stimulation. Most researchers agree that the real power of exercise may be psychological.

"One of the first things that I ask my patients to do is walk," sex therapist Kessler says. Long before she sees changes in their bodies she notices improved moods, energy, and self-image. Ninety-eight percent of De Villers' subjects said exercise boosted their self-confidence, and 89% said it improved their sexual confidence.

"Most people are happier to share

their bodies when they like them," De Villers says.

But don't overdo it. Studies show that super-athletes, such as ultramarathoners, experience dampened desire during training. It is also thought that during rigorous exercise, the body channels blood away from the genitals, lowering levels of testosterone. Overtraining in women sometimes lowers estrogen production. The potential result: reduced rates of orgasm.

Walk this way. Walking is one of the best ways to enhance your desire, performance, and pleasure. "Regular walking has clear effects on cardiovascular health and physical health, so it can only work toward rather than against your sex life," De Villers says. John Duncan, Ph.D., chief of clinical application at the Cooper Institute for Aerobics Research in Dallas, recommends you walk half an hour, at 14 to 16 minutes per mile, four days a week. "The important thing is to walk on a regular basis," Duncan says.

Regardless of the pace, walking can make you a better lover. First, it can put you in touch with your physical self, De Villers says. "Americans are body-alien." She suggests that you use walking to notice how your body moves, how your muscles warm as you travel along. "It's important to realize that you are a physical entity and to take pleasure in that."

You can also use walking to learn to think in sensual terms. For example, as you meander along, touch the trees, feel the breeze, and smell the flowers. This will perk up your senses and tune you in to the tactile pleasures. Renewing your sensual awareness can be key to sexual satisfaction.

But perhaps most importantly, "Walking offers an excellent opportunity for quality interaction," De Villers says. "People don't give each other enough undivided attention these days." Taking a walk, sans ringing telephones and screaming children, provides a great way for couples to reconnect, DeVillers explains. Good communication leads to intimacy. Intimacy is fundamental to a good relationship. And nothing, but nothing, is better for good sex than a good, healthy relationship. So, walk, walk, walk! **W**

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