

**SURE, EXERCISE MAKES
YOU FEEL GOOD. BUT
CAN IT MAKE YOU FEEL SEXY?**

in the MOOD

BY HOLLY REICH

Ever since the dawn of time (or the dawn of *our* time, anyway), doctors have been telling us that exercise is healthy. Good news, yes. But also pretty uninspiring news—for that matter, wheat germ and spinach are healthy too, but that doesn't necessarily convince us to *eat* them! At last, researchers have come up with one really good reason to dust off those old aerobics sneakers and actually make use of them: It seems exercise may be able to boost your libido, and help pep up a sagging sex life in the process.

How could something like exercise possibly help make you feel frisky? According to the experts, it's due partly to a positive psychological change that takes place when you start to work out regularly. Says Virginia Sadock, M.D., sex therapist and professor of psychiatry at New York University Medical Center in Manhattan, "Body image has a lot to do with it. If you feel good about yourself, you're more likely to feel sexy."

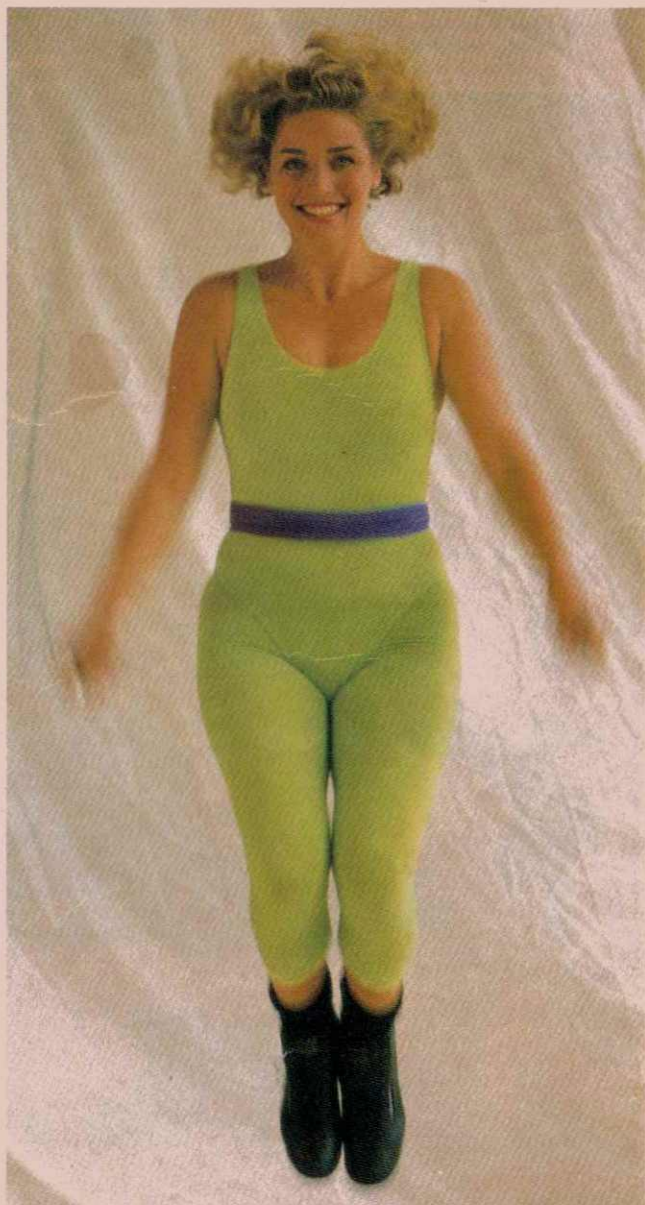
THE PROOF IS IN THE POOL

A recent study conducted by Phillip Whitten, professor of human behavioral biology at Harvard University, suggests that regular exercise can improve your love life. To help prove his theory, he studied swimmers who trained an average of an hour a day, four to five days a week, and divided them into two groups: men and women in their 40's, and another group who were 60 and over. The fortysomething crowd reported sex lives more like those of people in the general population in their late 20's and 30's (which means frequency of about seven times a month), and they can expect their frequency to remain above average; the swimming 60-and-up's weren't far behind.

The study found out some other interesting facts: 80% of the swimmers rated themselves as attractive or very attractive, and

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no one rated him- or herself as below average. Obviously, exercise makes people feel more attractive. But there's more to it than simply self-esteem. The spouses and lovers of the participants rated them as even more attractive than the swimmers rated themselves.

HOW HORMONES HELP

Improved body image undoubtedly has a lot to do with this effect, but other possible causes—like hormonal changes—are also currently being explored. One interesting area of research is the brief rise in testosterone levels associated with exercise and competition. (The winners' levels go up, while the losers' levels go down.) In most species, especially male primates, a rise in testosterone is associated with an increase in aggression and sexual behavior. But since there is no direct correlation between testosterone and sexuality in human beings above a certain threshold, Whitten remains skeptical. "There is no convincing evidence yet of a hormonal link between exercise and sexual desire," he says.

Ironically, the same studies that suggest a hormonal link between exercise and sex show that fanatically working out tends to

have an *adverse* effect on sexual desire. "For those participants who trained hardest of all—18 hours or more a week—we did find a relationship between exercise and desire. A negative one," says Whitten. "For both men and women, extremely rigorous training actually diminished sexual desire." He explains why this makes sense: "The people in the study were mostly adults with family and career obligations. When you take that amount of time out for training, you soon feel exhausted. You have little time or energy for lovemaking."

IT'S ALL CONFIDENCE

It has been found that some people use exercise as a substitute for intimacy, and get hooked on it due to the body's production of natural opiates, called endorphins, in response to exercise. Exercise is a physical outlet, after all, and it's possible to get compulsive about it. More often, however, endorphins increase sexual desire, notes Linda De Villers, a Santa Monica psychologist who presents sexual confidence workshops as part of her Love Skills programs (a series of seminars for singles and couples to enrich sexual relationships). In her programs, De Villers helps participants develop sexual confidence, which she describes as the belief that you are desirable, skillful and that you know how to give and receive.

In her studies, De Villers polled more

than 8,000 women aged 18-48, 83% of whom had been exercising aerobically three or more times a week for at least three months. Her findings showed that regular exercise boosted sexual confidence and drive, especially when combined with necessary and sensible weight loss. "For those on a weight-loss program who find exercising a drag, they should consider that an extra perk may be a pepped-up sex life," she says. She also thinks exercise may prove to be useful in treating sexual dysfunction, especially cases of diminished desire.

Is aerobic exercise the only type of workout that helps you achieve this "altered state," or do strength-training and flexibility programs help you attain similar results? Since documented research into this effect to date has included only aerobic exercise, this might mislead people into answering "yes." But there's room for discussion here. For instance, Whitten feels that a very deconditioned person who becomes involved in *any* program of exercise and gets in better shape could expect to experience heightened sexual interest.

So this Valentine's Day, forget the wine and candlelight: Put on your his and hers sweatsuits and go for a jog. Even if it doesn't boost your libidos, it'll certainly make your hearts pound!

Holly Reich is a New York-based freelance writer.