

makin' whoopee

Good old-fashioned sex can do more for your health than the latest wonder drug. Better yet, sex with a loving partner relieves pain, erases years and actually boosts your immune system. Here's why sex is just what the doctor ordered.

BY MARCIA KAYE

How would you feel about an activity that can burn calories, strengthen your immune system, improve circulation, relieve pain, tone muscles, counter depression, make you look younger, use equipment you already own and is absolutely free?

It's not the latest wonder drug or aerobic workout; it's as ancient as human life itself. Sex, especially regular sexual activity with a caring partner, confers many emotional and psychological health benefits, and there's a growing body of evidence to prove it. Dr. John Bancroft, a psychiatrist and director of the world-famous Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction, based in Bloomington, Ind., says there's no doubt about it: "Having a rewarding and enjoyable relationship with sexual intimacy is good for you."

Kristina Towill, a registered marital and sex therapist in Kelowna, B.C., says that while the physical act itself carries some benefits, the milieu of a loving relationship multiplies those benefits many times over. "Sex in the context of a relationship bolsters mental health and emotional well-being for both men and women. The research shows that couples who are sexually active are happier than couples who aren't," says Towill.

Legal, non-fattening, and requiring no membership fees, sex may be just what the doctor ordered.

The 20-Minute Workout

It's no Boston marathon (well, OK, maybe some people come close), but sex may be more of a physical workout than we once thought. Dr. Jay Lee, a Calgary urologist with a special interest in sexual medicine for men, women and couples, says, "We now say that for men, the energy expended during sex equates to a game of golf – carrying your own clubs."

And for women? Those studies haven't been done (volunteers can form a line to the right). But because a woman's energy expenditure during sex is so variable, the workout potential can range anywhere from that of a round of mini-putt, to that of a challenging 18-hole course with hills, to that of sitting in the cart with a glass of iced tea. Some calorie-expenditure charts say that for the average 145-pound Canadian woman, 20 minutes of moderate sex burns about 93 calories – more than a 20-minute stroll or leisurely cycling, about as much as doubles tennis.

Like any exercise, sex can increase breathing rates, strengthen muscles, boost circulation and improve cholesterol levels. (But it differs from most other body-contact sports in that special gear is optional.) Sex revs up the heart rate, and there's an increasingly strong correlation between sexual frequency and heart health, says Dr. Richard Casey, an Oakville, Ont., urologist

and editor of the *Journal of Sexual and Reproductive Medicine*. A study from Wales followed more than 900 men aged 45 to 59 for 10 years. Compared to those who had two or more orgasms per week, those with far fewer orgasms had twice the death rate from cardiovascular disease and other causes.

Tonight, Darling, I Have a Headache!

Have sex within an hour of getting a migraine, and you could literally be feeling no pain. Of 34 subjects in an Illinois study, 11 – all women – experienced complete or partial relief from their classic migraines after having sex that included orgasms. (In a few unlucky people, sex can sometimes trigger a headache.) Other studies have found that sex can relieve menstrual cramps and arthritis pain. It seems that arousal and orgasm trigger an endorphin rush in the brain, which acts as an analgesic, or pain blocker. With migraines, the serotonin released during orgasm causes a constriction of the dilated blood vessels in the brain that were causing the migraine. “The increase in endorphins lasts for an estimated one to three hours,” says Lee.

The Immunity Idol

Can sex fight viruses? A study from Wilkes University in Wilkes Barre, Penn., found that among 111 college students, those who had sex once or twice a week had significantly higher IgA – a marker of the strength of the immune system – compared to abstainers. Some scientists suggest that this is a chicken-or-egg scenario: perhaps it’s the case that healthy people (that is, those with higher IgA levels) are more likely to have sex anyway. But then, why did the students who had very frequent sex, at least three times a week, have lower IgA levels than those who had no sex at all? One possibility, researchers postulate, is that those in the very-frequent sex group tend to be obsessive, and anxiety lowers IgA levels.

The Joy of Sex

Speaking of happy college students, a University of Albany study in New York found that among 300 young women, those who weren’t using condoms during intercourse rated themselves with fewer symptoms of depression than those who did use condoms. The researchers hastened to caution that condoms remain crucial to protect people from disease or unwanted pregnancy. But could semen actually elevate a woman’s mood? That was the suggestion that had everybody buzzing.

The jury may be out on that, but you don’t need a study to tell you that sexual intimacy with someone you love makes you feel better about yourself. “You feel like, ‘I may not make the centrefold of Playboy, but it’s my body, and damn it all, it works,’” says sexual educator and counsellor Sue Johanson, TV host of the “Sunday Night Sex Show” and “Talk Sex.” Ottawa sex therapist and author Sue McGarvie adds that with sex you “feel more confident in your body and are less likely to have body image issues.”

Enjoyable sex relieves workaday stresses. A Montreal woman whose husband is often away on business says, “I get antsy if he’s away for a week, and it comes out as irritation and restlessness. There are times when I don’t stop eating all day.” Once her husband returns, the sexual release creates an immediate sense of well-being. Sex also induces sleep – much faster in some than others.

Healthy Hormones

Our bodies seem to like predictable patterns, such as regular mealtimes and bedtimes. A multi-year series of U.S. studies found that women who have sex with men at least once a week are more likely to have regular menstrual cycles, fewer problems with infertility and an easier menopause than who either have no sex or have an alternating binge-and-fast pattern. Why? The key – get this – seems to be regular exposure to a man’s particular odour (not the stinky locker-room smell but the pheromones released as sexual attractants).

Regular sex for many months or even a year before conception could also lead to safer pregnancy. According to research from reproductive biologists at the University of Adelaide in Australia, lots of sexual encounters with the intended father help relax the mother’s natural defenses against foreign objects (such as sperm and babies), reducing her risk of miscarriage or stillbirths. Earlier studies of more than 1,0000 Caribbean island of Guadeloupe found that those who’d had sex with the father for four months or less before becoming pregnant had eight times the risk of pre-eclampsia, a potentially fatal high blood pressure condition, compared to those who’d been having sex with the father for at least a year.

Fountain of Youth

A satisfying sex life is rejuvenating in every way. “Regular sexual activity, whether through self-stimulation or with a partner, can counter or slow down age-related changes in women,” says sex therapist Towill. “It increases blood flow to the genitals and can prevent the tissues from losing elasticity or becoming dry.” Dr. Marjon Blouw, a Winnipeg family physician with a special interest in sexual medicine, adds that you should “Start having regular sexual activity before you get dry, and you’ll continue to do better with lubrication.”

You may look better, too. A Scottish study reported that people who have sex at least three times a week within the context of a loving relationship look more than 10 years younger than the average adult who makes love twice a week. (Or maybe all the sex leaves them little time for anything that’s aging, like going out in the sun, or working.)

A Toronto woman, 55, whose partner told her that after sex she looked younger, tested out his theory recently by looking in the mirror shortly after they had made love. “I couldn’t believe it myself,” she says. “I looked 20 years younger. My eyes were brighter, my skin was smoother, my whole being was perkier. The afterglow is real.”

A University of Calgary study found sexual activity triggers the growth of new neurons in the brain. So far it’s only in mice, but there are exciting implications for humans in terms of brain damage from stroke, Parkinson’s or Alzheimer’s.

The Ultimate Connection

Many of the protective benefits of sexual activity can be reaped without a partner, in a “onesome.” But it takes two to enjoy that exquisitely intimate connectedness. “Sex is the glue that gives us the depth of emotional connection that is unique to marital relationships,” says Towill.

Any couple who stop having sex often feel like roommates or siblings – with the accompanying rivalry and squabbles. A British study reported that couples who volunteered to abstain from sex for three months all started to experience marital difficulties.

There's no question that good sex is good for you. The challenge, says Blouw, is getting women to make pleasurable sexual activity a priority. "Maybe," she muses, "I should start to write it on a prescription pad."

How Regular is Regular?

If you're worried that "regular sexual activity" means three times a week, put that worry right out of your head. "Most of the stats out there are grossly inaccurate," says sex therapist Kristina Towill. She believes that the Canadian Male Sexual Health Council Survey, sponsored by Pfizer, makers of Viagra – which found that Canadians have sex an average of four to six times a month – accurately reflects the frequency of sexual activity that Towill sees in her own clinical work.

Sexual educator and counsellor Sue Johanson suggests: "Once a week. It used to be 2.1 times a week, but now we've got the DINTS – Double Income, No Time for Sex."

Dr. John Bancroft of the Kinsey Institute says that regular sex could mean every day, every week, every full moon or every New Year's Eve, as long as it's consensual.

"The only thing that 'regular' conveys is that a particular couple knows when to anticipate sex next," Bancroft says. And maybe even looks forward to it.

Love Potions, Lotions and Emotions

Since the success of Viagra to treat men's sexual dysfunction, "stimulation-enhancing" genital creams and herbal products have flooded the female market, sold by multi-level distributors and appearing as pop-ups on our computer screens. Most clitoral creams contain L-Arginine, an amino acid that can increase blood flow, and menthol, which gives a tingling sensation.

Some women swear by them. After using O Cream (now called Tickle Her Pink), a Canadian woman with multiple sclerosis says, "It does give that extra helping hand." A Toronto woman whose sexual response faded after hysterectomy and breast cancer uses Viacreme (now renamed Alure or Mycreme): "It's as if I've brought to life a part of my body that was sleeping."

The experts say there's no empirical evidence that herbs or clitoral creams have any more than a placebo response. Because some of them were making drug claims to cure sexual dysfunction, Health Canada imposed an import ban or insisted that the companies change product names and advertised claims. Sex therapist Sue McGarvie, who is often asked to endorse products, says, "I've tried them all, and honestly, I didn't notice a difference for me." She hasn't endorsed any.

Sexual educator Sue Johanson says that it's not the actual product that has a stimulating effect but how it's applied. "You could rub crankcase oil on your genitals and get the same effect," she says. (Don't try this at home. Instead, use a lubricant or warming lotion.)

Sexual Saboteurs

So why aren't we leaping into bed at every opportunity? The most common reasons, according to Dr. Marion Blouw, are lack of time; inability to converse with your partner; lack of privacy because of young children, night-owl teenagers or even curious pets; and fatigue. Other factors that can dampen sex drive or arousal:

- Diseases including diabetes, cardiovascular disease, thyroid disorders and autoimmune disease like multiple sclerosis or lupus.
- Medications such as birth control pills, antidepressants, anti-hypertensives and diuretics.

- Conditions that make intercourse painful, such as chronic yeast infections, endometriosis, fibroids, vulvar inflammation, vaginal lesions or earlier sexual trauma.

If you have medical concerns that are affecting your sex life, talk to your doctor, who can refer to a gynecologist or sex therapist.
