

Female orgasmic difficulties

Department of Medical Psychology

A decorative graphic on the right side of the page, consisting of several overlapping, curved shapes in shades of purple, teal, and blue, creating a layered, wave-like effect.

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What is an orgasm?

An orgasm is often described as the peak or climax of sexual arousal and is usually experienced as highly pleasurable. The feeling of intensity of an orgasm may vary depending on the form of stimulation (i.e. penis, tongue, vibrator) and the area which is stimulated (i.e. vaginal or clitoral). It may vary with different partners and within different environments or situations.

Some women have small ripple orgasms, others have much more intense orgasms. There are women who have one orgasm after the other; for others, one is quite enough. Although an orgasm may enhance the sexual experience, it is not essential and many women have perfectly satisfying ways of making love without the need for an orgasm.

An orgasm often comes with age and experience, as a woman becomes more familiar with her body, more able to express her sexual needs and wants, and has a partner who is more experienced.

Difficulties reaching sexual orgasm or arousal

Difficulties reaching orgasm are very common and many women experience problems at some stage in their lives. Approximately three quarters of women never or rarely reach orgasm during penetrative intercourse. Most women need steady clitoral stimulation for orgasm to occur, and many sexual positions do not provide this sufficiently on their own. Most women reach orgasm through other forms of stimulation such as with fingers, tongue or a vibrator. As long as a woman is left feeling satisfied, neither she nor her partner should feel that they have in any way failed. However, if it is causing difficulties in the relationship, and/or feelings of disappointment or distress, you may find this leaflet helpful.

- There are two types of difficulties with orgasm:
 - 1) Primary – when the woman has never experienced an orgasm.
 - 2) Secondary – when the woman develops problems following a period of being able to have an orgasm. This may be as a result of an illness, traumatic experience, or change of partner.
- An orgasm can also be absolute - when the women is unable to reach orgasm under any circumstances, or situational – when the women is only able to reach climax under certain circumstances, or with a particular person. Some women find that it takes them a long time to reach orgasm, which can cause problems.

So what are the causes?

The causes may be physical, psychological or a combination of the two.

Physical causes

- There are few medical reasons why a woman cannot reach orgasm. However if you have a diagnosed neurological, vascular or hormone problem, or have undergone pelvic surgery, then check with your doctor.
- A common factor is tiredness or general illness. Our bodies need to be in general good health in order to enjoy sex. If your body is feeling run down, your body's priority is sleep and recuperation, not sexual gratification.
- The problem could be a side effect of medication or illicit substance abuse. Too much alcohol is also known to dry up the vaginal secretions and reduce the blood flow to the sex organs.
- Removal of the clitoris or female genital mutilation, as practised in some African, Middle Eastern and Asian cultures, is also a known cause of female orgasmic difficulties.
- Loss of orgasm has also been linked to major changes in a woman's life such as childbirth, hysterectomy, or menopause.

Psychological causes

"You cannot will an orgasm. The harder you try, the less likely you are to achieve this".

- A common psychological cause is "spectatoring". This is when the woman is waiting for the moment of orgasm rather than enjoying the experience, causing her to detach from what is happening, often leading to increased anxiety and impatience.
- Similarly distractions such as worrying about other things (i.e. Can anyone hear? Does my body look good?), mean that the mind is not in the moment. Life stressors such as financial worries, job loss or divorce may be causes of worry and distraction.
- Relationship problems are another major contributor to sexual dissatisfaction. If there is unresolved tension with a partner, it is likely that sexual relations will suffer.
- Problems relating to the partner may also include mistrust or fear, differences in desire for sexual activity, inhibition (holding back) or fear in communicating preferences.
- Causes of sexual inhibition or holding back may include feelings of shame or guilt and fear of sexual acts or the possible consequences e.g. pain during intercourse, contracting a sexually transmitted disease or becoming pregnant.
- Other causes of sexual inhibition include fear of 'losing control' or 'letting go', which may be related to a combination of different psychological factors, or physical problems such as incontinence.
- Past sexual abuse, rape, incest or other traumatic sexual experience are also common causes of orgasmic difficulties.
- Negative sexual messages from the past may leave a woman feeling uncomfortable about being sexually aroused. This may include sexual beliefs passed along through families and cultures which may encourage

misconceptions about sex or gaps in sexual knowledge leading to sexual inhibition. For example: sex is bad, dangerous, dirty etc.

- Other possible causes include poor self-esteem, body image issues, feeling sexually unattractive, mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression, and perfectionist tendencies i.e. sex has to be just right.

When to seek help?

- Sex is something that, for most couples, either bonds their relationship closer together, or something that becomes a wedge that gradually drives them apart. When one partner in a relationship is significantly less satisfied than the other, and this has become a source of distress, it is recommended that the couple address this as a priority.
- Even when there is an open and loving relationship, female difficulties reaching orgasm may cause a partner to repeatedly feel hurt and rejected. This can lead to eventual feelings of resentment and emotional distance.

Self-help techniques

- One way of tackling the problem is to reserve time for non-sexual intimacy with your partner. Couples who reserve time to talk, and regular time alone are more likely to maintain a closer relationship characterised by more trust and security.
- Open and honest communication with your partner can enhance your emotional and sexual intimacy. Learning to talk about your sexual preferences, and providing feedback in a sensitive manner can set the stage for greater intimacy and increased stimulation. Next time your partner is caressing you, put your hand over theirs and show them the kind of pressure and stroke you enjoy.

- Relaxation is the most important thing you can do to reach orgasm. Take time out for you to relax in the bath, pamper yourself first or share an all-over body massage.
- Practising self-stimulation, commonly known as masturbation. There is nothing wrong with masturbation, in fact it is a basic part of the treatment prescribed by sex therapists in helping women become more familiar with their body and how to arouse themselves.
- It is not stimulation of the vagina, but the clitoris that leads to orgasm for most women – the clitoris is the peak you can feel in the front of the vagina. Investing in a vibrator or trying different positions can serve to maximise stimulation. It is important to ensure that you are really aroused before attempting intercourse, so plenty of foreplay is essential.
- Strengthening pelvic floor muscles. Tensing the pelvic floor muscle increases sexual sensation – ask your therapist if you are unsure how to do this.

Psychosexual therapy

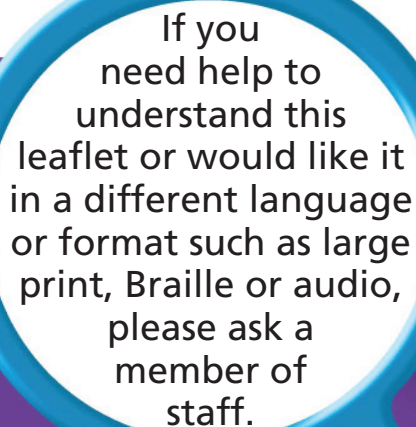
- If you feel that emotional factors including relationship problems or psychological problems, including depression, anxiety, sexual fears or guilt, or past sexual trauma/abuse are the primary factors in your difficulties, talking with a skilled psychosexual therapist may help you address your sexual concerns.
- Psychosexual therapy recognises that orgasmic responses vary and that there is no right way to experience sexual pleasure. It will encourage you to adapt your lovemaking to best suit you and your partner's needs by expanding the variety and time devoted to sexual activity and thus ways to enhance intimacy with your partner. It will encourage you to become more familiar with your body and what

pleases you sexually. Books and videos are often helpful and the therapist may suggest that you buy a vibrator and experiment with using it to stimulate yourself.

- The therapist will help you to break the self-defeating cycle of negative anticipation, unpleasant or unsatisfying experience and avoidance that many women who struggle to reach orgasm find themselves in. The focus of therapy is therefore on improving the quality and satisfaction of the sexual relationship, rather than increasing the frequency of how often an orgasm occurs. This process takes time and involves patience and practice, so make sure you are both committed to the process and enjoy it.
- Psychological therapy can support individuals or couples in making positive changes within their relationships. Communication training in talking about feelings, learning to show empathic understanding, and resolving differences in a manner that reflects sensitivity and respect, all work to gradually diffuse a women's anxiety about giving up control so she can reach orgasm without difficulty. It is often helpful to work through such differences in nonsexual areas before focusing directly on enhancing sexual activity.
- Another important element of the work is sensate focus exercises. If difficulty communicating your sexual needs is at the root of the problem, these exercises can help you and your partner develop these skills. By placing the emphasis on enjoyment rather than reaching orgasm, a woman can relax and focus on her own pleasure. (Speak to your therapist for handouts on this.)

Useful books or websites

- Heiman, J. R. & Lopiccolo, T. (2009). Becoming orgasmic: A Sexual and Personal Growth Programme for Women. Piatkus Books.
- Hare, J (2007). Orgasms and how to have them. Visions.



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