

Female Sexuality: *Part I*

Patient Particulars is designed to help osteopathic physicians communicate information about female sexual function to their patients.

This column is written in language that patients should easily understand. DOs can use this column to improve their communications with patients. DOs can also photocopy this column as patient education material to supplement their discussions with patients.

Problem Definitions, Causes, Signs and Symptoms

Something just isn't right in the bedroom, you think. You care about your partner, but you're just never in the mood for sex. If so, you could be suffering from what's known as hypoactive sexual desire, inhibited sexual desire, or sexual apathy. Whatever the term, this problem can mean low or lost libido, lack of desire for sex, low sex drive, or even pain during sex.

Take comfort. You're not alone. Women can suffer from several sexual problems in the broad category of female sexual dysfunction (FSD). While your physician can evaluate, diagnose, and treat sexual problems, it's also helpful to learn as much as you can about female sexuality on your own. Just ask yourself these questions:

- ❑ Do you lack interest in or avoid sex?
- ❑ Do you have trouble getting aroused?
- ❑ Do you get aroused but then have trouble having an orgasm?
- ❑ Do you have pain before, during or after sexual intercourse?

If your answer to any of these questions is "yes," you'll want to use this handout to learn more about FSD and its causes, signs and symptoms.

Understanding Female Sexual Response

Female sexual response is divided into these phases:

Desire: You want a sexual experience or stimulation.

Arousal: Requiring some 30 minutes for some women, this phase involves physical changes in the vagina, clitoris, breasts, labia, and uterus.

Plateau: The highest level of sexual excitement, this phase involves increases in your heart and breathing rate, blood pressure, and muscle tension.

Orgasm: A release of sexual tension and of chemicals called endorphins gives you a pleasant feeling of contentment and well-being.

Resolution: Your body gradually begins to return back to the place it was before sex began in this final phase.

Types of Female Sexual Problems

Experts point to four types of female sexual problems:

1. **Low sexual desire**—You're not interested in sex, have a low libido, or lack sex drive.
2. **Arousal problems**—You may have a desire for sex, but you can't seem to get aroused—or maintain arousal—during sex.
3. **Orgasm problems**—You may become aroused, but you can't achieve an orgasm.
4. **Sexual pain**—You experience pain connected with stimulation, intercourse, or vaginal contact.



Possible Causes

Each of these problems may have different causes. Among them are these:

- | Limited knowledge of female anatomy—especially the clitoris and how it works.
- | Poor or limited techniques for getting and staying aroused.
- | Guilt about sex related to family upbringing.
- | Traumatic experiences with sex such as rape or incest.
- | Fear of intimacy and closeness.
- | Depression and stress.
- | Drugs for treatment of depression or other conditions.
- | Illness or physical problems.
- | Hormonal changes due to menopause or premenopause.
- | Relationship problems and lack of communication closeness.

As you think about what might have led to your sexual problem or concern, work with your physician to look at emotional, family and physical factors.

Emotional and Family Issues

Following are some emotional and family issues that could be the root of your sexual problem or concern:

- | Problems within the family.
- | Lack of time alone with your partner.
- | Interpersonal conflicts and power struggles.
- | Illness or death.
- | Financial problems.
- | Job worries.
- | Pregnancy and childbirth.
- | Chronic anxiety.
- | Lack of life balance.
- | Concerns about sexual identity or orientation.
- | Religious or cultural beliefs.

Physical Problems

Following are some physical problems and health factors that could be the root of your sexual problem or concern:

- | Fatigue
- | Vaginal dryness
- | High blood pressure
- | Heart disease
- | Cancer
- | Diabetes
- | Hypothyroidism
- | Adrenal insufficiency
- | Neurological diseases such as multiple sclerosis
- | Vaginal yeast infections
- | Cystitis
- | Endometriosis
- | Vaginitis
- | Breast-feeding
- | Prescription drugs
- | Over-the-counter medications
- | Alcohol
- | Illegal drugs

How to Prevent Some Sexual Problems

Not all sexual problems can be prevented. However, sexual partners can work together to prevent inhibited sexual desire (ISD), the most common of all sexual problems, by taking these steps:

- | Set aside prime time for sex. Avoid making it a “late-night leftover.”
- | Make time for a weekly date—without children and other distractions.
- | Look for fun, nonsexual ways to display affection each day.
- | Read books or take courses or workshops on couples communication.
- | Take time out for sensual, playful activities such as massages, backrubs, showers, and bubble baths.
- | Experience romantic or erotic films, videos, or books together.
- | Get away for an occasional romantic weekend or cruise.

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Resources

– Mayo Clinic’s award-winning consumer Web site offering health and medical information, news and self-improvement and disease management tools:

www.mayoclinic.com (women’s health), *Sexual Dysfunction in Women: Find Your Way Back to Intimacy*.

– Medical Library. JAMA Patient Page:

www.medem.com (women’s health), *Sexual Dysfunction - Silence About Sexual Problems Can Hurt Relationships and Sexuality and Sexual Problems*.

– American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy: www.aamft.org (AAMFT consumer update), *Female Sexual Problems*.

– National Women’s Health Information Center: www.4woman.gov. Provides free, reliable health information for women everywhere.

– Planned Parenthood Federation of America, Inc:

www.plannedparenthood.org (women’s health), *Sexuality Education: A Women’s Guide to Sexuality*.

– National Institute on Aging:

www.niapublications.org. *Health Information, Sexuality in Later Life*.

– American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors and Therapists: www.aasect.org (For the Public), *FAQs on Human Sexuality*.