

## Sexual health

Sexuality plays an important role in the health and wellbeing of women across the lifespan. There are physical, psychological and social factors that affect our experience of sexuality and sex:

### Physical

- Overall level of health and wellbeing
- Normal ageing
- Health issues and some medications, such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) for depression
- Changes in hormone levels eg oestrogen and testosterone (hormones produced by the ovaries) – these impact on mood, sexual desire and the physical changes that occur during arousal

### Psychological

- Beliefs and feelings about yourself
- Mood (depression, anxiety, grief)
- Self-esteem
- Body image
- Personal history including past experience of sex
- Relationship satisfaction

### Social

- What is considered appropriate (eg what age to start and finish your sexual life)
- Your environment (eg lack of privacy for you or your partner working long hours)
- Cultural influences and expectations about what is an appropriate sexual response and identity

Whether you are alone or with a partner you will still have sexual needs and desires. It is up to you to express this part of your life in a way that is right for you (causing no harm).

### Sexual problems

About 60% of women in Australia report one or more sexual problems. Sexual problems (often called sexual dysfunction) are usually defined to mean you are not able to experience sex as you would wish and this causes you distress.



Different types of problems often relate to the different areas of:

#### **Arousal**

The physical response to sexual thoughts or activity such as lubrication and swelling of the genitals

#### **Libido**

The desire to take part in sexual activities either with a partner or yourself

#### **Orgasm**

The climax of sexual excitement, characterised by pleasure centred in the genitals

#### **Frequency**

How often you take part in sexual activities

Women can experience a number of common sexual problems, including:

- vaginismus – where the muscles of the pelvic floor spasm
- dyspareunia – where sexual intercourse is painful

### Contraception

Finding an ideal contraceptive will depend on your health, relationship needs and future plans, such as whether you have decided not to have any children, or no more children; whether you are perimenopausal (in transition to menopause) or postmenopausal.

Contraception to avoid pregnancy is recommended from the time you start to become sexually active until at least one to two years after menopause (one year after your last period). Permanent contraception may also be an option.

### What is safer sex?

The exchange of body fluids can occur with vaginal sex, anal sex, oral sex, oral anal contact, fingers or objects in the vagina or anus (if they have these fluids on them). Safer sex is where semen, vaginal secretions or blood are **not** exchanged between partners.

Unprotected sex with your regular partner will only be safe as long as you are both only having sex with each other. Withdrawal (pulling out before ejaculation) is not safe because sexual fluids can be released before ejaculation (pre-ejaculatory fluid).

### Sexually transmissible infections (STIs)

An STI is an infection spread from one person to another during unprotected sex. STIs include herpes, gonorrhoea, human papilloma virus (the cause of cervical cancer), chlamydia, pubic lice, syphilis, genital warts and hepatitis B. Anyone can catch an STI whatever their sexual orientation. The risk of getting an STI remains a lifelong concern so knowledge of safer sex practices is important and should be considered for all new relationships.

- Have a check-up for STIs before having sex with a new partner
- Use condoms and dams (latex rubber sheets used for oral sex)
- Talk to partners about sexual health

### What's important?

A good sex life for women is related to:

- good physical and psychological health
- the quality, communication and expectations of your relationship
- past sexual experiences
- appropriate contraception and safer sex
- treatment of any physical pain or medical problems
- awareness, support and ability to talk about sex with people you trust

**For more information go to** [jeanhailes.org.au/health-a-z/sex-sexual-health](http://jeanhailes.org.au/health-a-z/sex-sexual-health)

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This fact sheet is designed to be informative and educational. It is not intended to provide specific medical advice or replace advice from your medical practitioner. References are available on request.

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