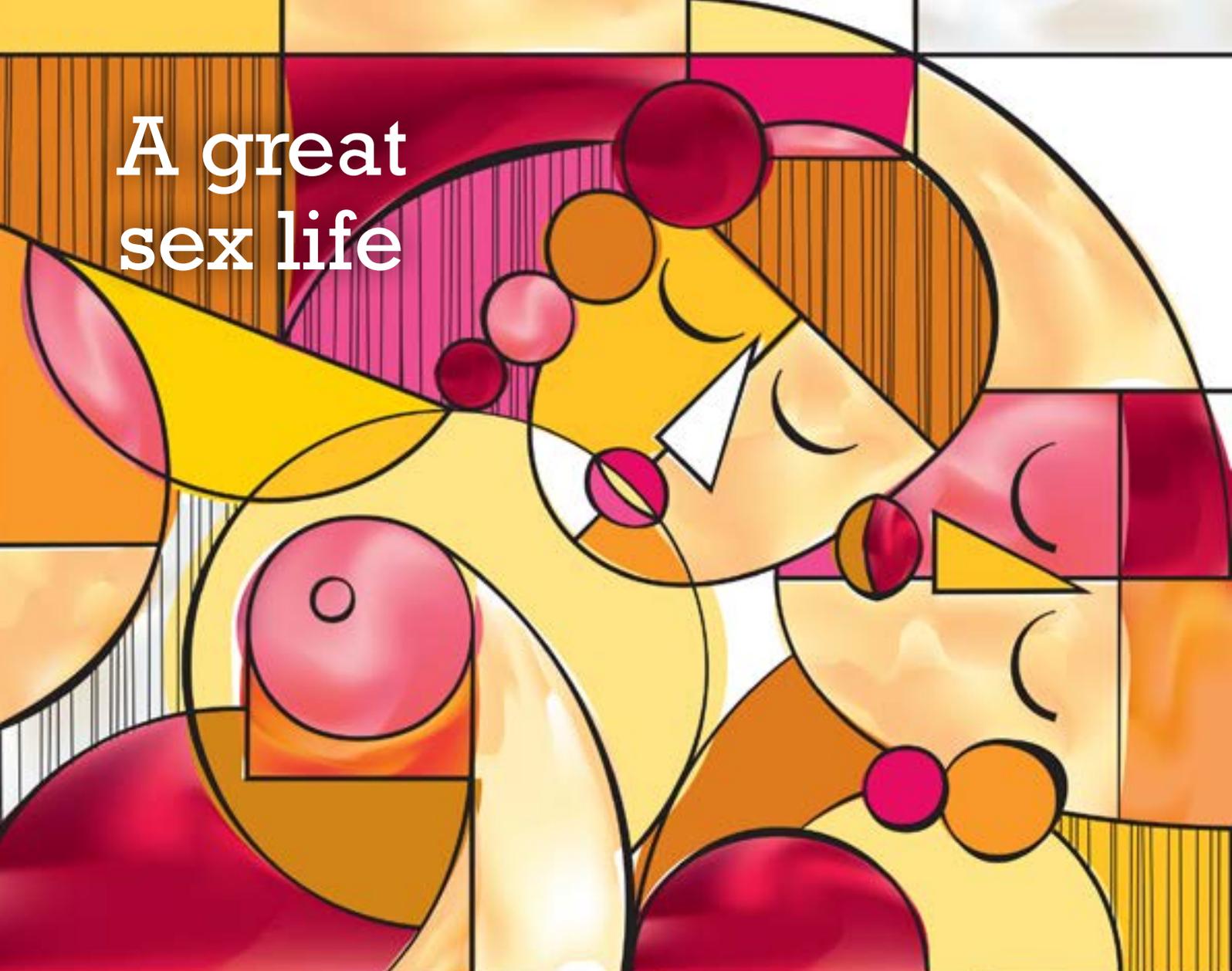


A great sex life



Over the course of our lives, our bodies, sexual needs and in many cases partners, will change. It is helpful to know what you can expect throughout different stages of your life, because having a good sex life plays an important role in your mental and physical health and wellbeing.

The beginning years

When starting and experimenting with sex, keep in mind that whenever and whomever you choose to have sex with is up to you, as long as it is safe, consensual and legal.

Dr Elizabeth Farrell, gynaecologist and Jean Hailes Founding Director says, "No one should force you to do anything you don't feel comfortable with and it is also important to respect the wishes of the other person".

Get to know your body

Do you know what your vulva looks like? How do you like to be touched? What don't you like? A fulfilling sex life is about feeling comfortable with your sexuality.

Learn to communicate your desires

It's great if you and your sexual partner can talk about what you want but it isn't always easy. There are non-verbal ways to communicate with your partner so that you have a fulfilling sexual encounter, such as responding positively to your partner's touch.

Consent must be given but can also be withdrawn at any stage



CASUAL SEX

If you are engaging in sex with multiple casual partners, remember that just because you aren't in a relationship, it doesn't mean you can't communicate your desires and have exciting and fulfilling sexual experiences. Consent and respect are the foundation of all sexual encounters.

Remember, exchanging body fluids increases your risk of contracting sexually transmissible infections (STI). Use a barrier protection method – such as a condom – to ensure you stay safe. While the contraceptive pill can protect you against pregnancy, it won't protect you from an STI.



DESIRE DISCREPANCY

Women often experience changes in their sex drive at different times in their life. Conflict and dissatisfaction within a relationship may occur if you and your partner have different levels of desire – known as mismatched libido.

If one partner has a lower sex drive, it does not mean they are bad or in the wrong. The important thing is to discuss these differences, including what puts you in the mood and what turns you off.

"Sometimes it's ok to decide to have sex even if you don't feel desire – as long as it's not painful and you are not being forced. Even though you might not have been initially interested in sex, you may find it pleasurable once you get going", Dr Farrell says.

If you are looking to overcome a disinterest in sex, some simple exercises can help:

- Make a list of the things you enjoy about sex
e.g. "I feel closeness to my partner" – listing the things that make you feel good about having sex can help to motivate you
- Make a list of the reasons for not feeling like sex
e.g. "I am too tired or too stressed" – think about what you can do or say to your partner at these times
- Make a list of anything else putting you off sex
e.g. "I feel embarrassed because I've gained weight"

Once you have thought about these things, it is helpful to explain to your partner how you are feeling; you may like to write down what you want to say, then pick a time when you can both focus on the discussion uninterrupted.

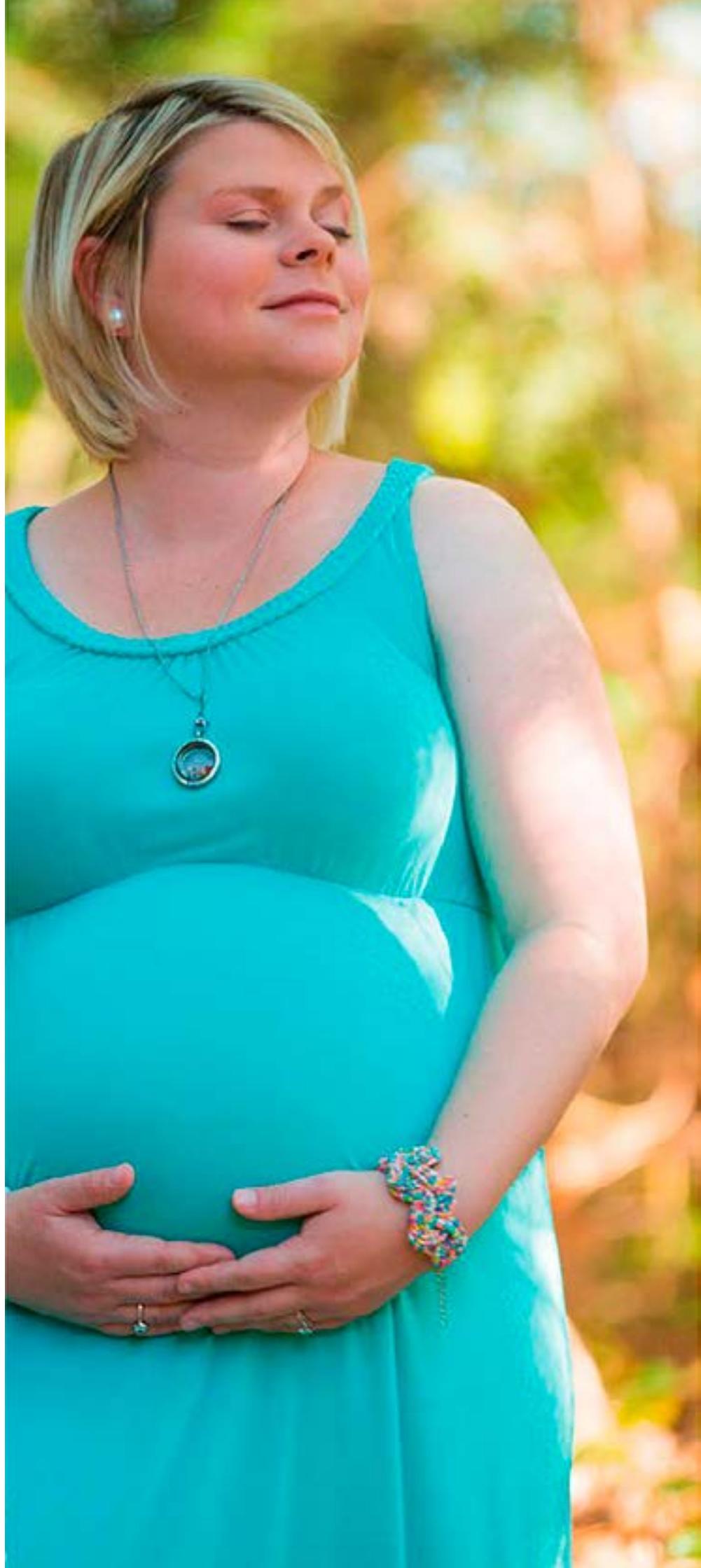
There could be more complicated reasons for a low libido (sexual desire). Seek counselling if you think that this might be the case with you.

Pregnancy and post childbirth

There is no right or wrong when it comes to how often you have sex when you are pregnant. Some women have an increased desire to have sex during pregnancy, others don't change and some have a lower desire. You are not going to damage your baby if you have sex throughout your pregnancy, however, if you have a medical condition such as a low lying placenta, discuss this with your doctor.

Sex after childbirth presents a new set of challenges. Couples are usually advised to wait 4-6 weeks after giving birth to resume sex but every couple is different. You should only start having sex again when you are comfortable. Many women experience pain after childbirth for quite some time which can affect the feelings they have towards sex.

You may find that tiredness, stress, pain or feeling differently about your body may affect your desire. Once again, communication is key. Maybe you are not ready for penetrative sex but would like to try some alternatives such as touching or oral sex. This is a way of reintroducing sex to your lives without causing pain or discomfort.



Menopause and beyond

Growing older doesn't necessarily mean women naturally lose interest in sex, despite declining hormones and other physical changes.

One study found the majority of women aged between 45 and 70 were still sexually active. The strongest predictor was the belief that sex was important and physical limitations were less important.

According to sex educator and founder of bliss4women.com, Maureen Matthews, a woman's largest erogenous zone is her mind.

"Reading erotic or sexually frank literature can be an effective way to practise arousal", she suggests.

Physical changes can also play a role in decreasing desire. Oestrogen declines around the time of menopause, resulting in changes such as thinning vaginal walls, reduced sexual lubrication of the vaginal area, increased levels of incontinence and fatigue.

There are ways to assist with these changes. For example, lubricants such as KY jelly and natural oils such as olive or sweet almond oil can replace moisture, reducing the discomfort of intercourse. Local oestrogen creams can be applied into the vaginal



area to help strengthen tissue. These creams use a weaker form of oestrogen than hormone replacement therapy, meaning blood levels do not rise enough to increase risks of cancers or heart disease. If you have incontinence issues, seeing a pelvic floor specialist can help.

The effects of life stressors at this stage may also decrease sexual desire.

"In their middle years women may be caring for children, and/or ageing parents, and/or dealing with career challenges", says Dr Farrell. "Competing life demands can sap the mental and emotional space women have to be interested in an active sexual life."

Maureen says, "Many women fear they will cease to be attractive and sexually viable after menopause, or they are anxious about waning desire. Often they are grieving for their younger, passionate selves".

"I reassure them that they need to find ways to stimulate sexual arousal, preferably when they are alone, and there is no expectation of sexual intercourse. With practice their body remembers how arousal feels, and confidence in being sexually interested returns."

Research shows older women are not only still interested in sex but are more likely to be assertive about their needs. They express a desire for more non-genital sexual expression with a greater focus on arousal and passion. They want their partners to indulge more in physical closeness and intimate acts such as kissing and cuddling.

Maureen points out that the health benefits of continuing to enjoy a fulfilling sex life include boosting the immune system and decreasing the risk of depression.

She adds, "At any age, it is important to develop a way to start talking about sex and to compromise and accommodate each other's sexual needs."



**MENOPAUSE
AND SEX RESOURCE**

jeanhailes.org.au/health-a-z/menopause/sex



FOR SENSUALITY IDEAS

bliss4women.com