



Fact Sheet:

The link between sexual pleasure and health

Sexual pleasure is too often considered taboo, even among medical professionals. Despite this, it is the main reason why people have sex and it not only helps people feel good about their bodies, but determines the decisions they make about their sex lives, which can then affect their health.



Healthy sex also goes hand-in-hand with healthy relationships and can help people:

- Feel good about their body
- Experience pleasure
- Feel comfortable and supported with their sexual orientation and gender identity

What is sex?

While there are a lot of definitions for sex, in this case we are referring to sexual activity, not just sexual intercourse.

There are many ways to enjoy a sexual experience, and no one form of sex is better than another. Sexual activity can range from activities done alone to acts with another person.

No matter what your definition of sex is, sexual experiences are as unique and creative as the people who engage in them.

[\(source\)](#)

What is sexual pleasure?

Sexual pleasure is more difficult to define because it can mean different things to different people. However, in recognition that sexual pleasure is a fundamental part of sexual rights, sexual health, and sexual wellbeing; participants of the [24th Congress of the World Association for Sexual Health](#) defined it as:

“The physical and or psychological satisfaction and enjoyment derived from shared or solitary erotic experiences, including thoughts, fantasies, dreams, emotions, and feelings.”

What influences sexual pleasure?

Gender, sexuality and pleasure are closely interwoven, so gender norms, roles and stereotypes often affect sexuality and sexual pleasure.

Many factors contribute to sexual pleasure including:

- Self-determination
- Consent
- Safety
- Privacy
- Confidence
- Ability to communicate and negotiate

Gender norms and stereotypes typically shape what happens in a relationship and, as such, unequal power relations between men and women can also carry through to sexual relationships ([source](#)).

When gendered norms that reinforce men's power are mixed with the hyper-sexualisation of girls and women in our society (sometimes referred to as 'raunch culture') it can lead to women conforming to men's sexual expectations. Pornography is a common example of this.

What influences sexual pleasure? *cont.*

Porn often focuses on particular types and ways of having sex which don't reflect what many people, particularly women, want or need to feel pleasure. Performers are paid to act to like they're enjoying what they are doing, and this is often centred around male pleasure, even if it uncomfortable, painful or humiliating. Sex should feel good – emotionally and physically – for everyone involved, whatever their gender.

Maree Crabbe

Raunch culture teaches young women to think of their sexuality as existing for others, and this impedes development of a healthy sexuality that prioritises one's own pleasure.

This can result in women – particularly young women – feeling that they don't have the right to refuse sex if their partner or an older person asks for it. These differences, or social constraints, can impact the development of healthy relationships and sexual experiences by causing:

- Disagreements about methods to prevent STIs, including HIV
- Unintended pregnancy
- Physical and emotional abuse
- Limited access to information and services.

(source)

While porn is more available today than in any other time in history, it is not the only constraint affecting women's pleasure and health. It was not until 1998, that the complete anatomy of the human clitoris was accurately described by Melbourne urologist, Helen O'Connell. Her work provides answers to some basic biological questions about sex (source).

In the 20 years since O'Connell's ground breaking study was released, clitoral anatomy remains largely absent from the medical curriculum and from medical research (source).

Why is sexual pleasure important for health and wellbeing?

Sexual rights, sexual health and sexual pleasure—as a whole—are fundamental to a person's overall health and wellbeing (source).

Integrating sexual pleasure into health education, promotion, programs and policies is imperative to improving public health in our region and across the nation and a range of resources exist to support with this. If you have questions about how to best do this, please reach out to our team.

Contact

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