

Decreased Libido (sexual desire)

Has your sex life lost some of its spark because your body feels unresponsive or you're just not interested? You might take comfort in knowing that as many as four in 10 women have the same problem at some point in their lives.

Below is some information about decreased libido that you may find useful.

- Decreased libido and its treatment can be a complicated matter because its causes can be so varied and its effects so complex.
- Decreased libido can be broken down into 3 main causes: physical, hormonal, and psychological/social factors.
- **Physical** factors include: diabetes, depression, cardiovascular disease and medication side effects. Physical conditions that may cause or contribute to sexual problems include arthritis, diabetes, hypertension, urinary or bowel difficulties, pelvic surgery, fatigue, headaches, other pain problems, and neurological disorders such as multiple sclerosis. Certain medications, including some antidepressants, blood pressure medications, antihistamines and chemotherapy drugs, can decrease your sex drive and your body's ability to achieve orgasm.
- **Hormonal.** Lower estrogen levels during the menopausal transition may lead to changes in your genital tissues and your sexual responsiveness. The vaginal lining becomes thinner and less elastic, particularly if you're not sexually active. At the same time, the vagina requires more stimulation to relax and lubricate before intercourse. These factors can lead to painful intercourse, and achieving orgasm may take longer.
Your body's hormone levels also shift after giving birth and during breast-feeding, which can lead to vaginal dryness and can affect your desire to have sex.
- **Psychological and social.** Untreated anxiety or depression can cause or contribute to sexual dysfunction, as can long-term stress. The worries of pregnancy and demands of being a new mother may have similar effects. Longstanding conflicts with your partner — about sex or any other aspect of your relationship — can diminish your sexual responsiveness as well. Cultural and religious issues and problems with your own body image also may contribute.
Emotional distress can be both a cause and a result of sexual dysfunction. Regardless of where the cycle began, you usually need to address relationship issues for treatment to be effective.
- Another common cause of decreased libido is relationship maturity, which is when one partner (or sometimes both) have loss of desire as their relationship develops. This is a natural process that often happens as individuals become more familiar with each other and the novelty or newness of the relationship wears off.
- **Treatments and drugs**

Women with sexual concerns benefit from a combined treatment approach that addresses medical as well as emotional issues. Occasionally, there's a specific medical solution — using vaginal estrogen cream, for example, or switching from one antidepressant medication to another. More often, behavioral treatments — such as couple's therapy and stress management — are needed to address the roots of female sexual dysfunction. And sometimes, a combination approach works best.

Non-medical treatment for female sexual dysfunction

You can improve your sexual health by enhancing communication with your partner and making healthy lifestyle choices.

- **Talk and listen.** Some couples never talk about sex, but open and honest communication with your partner can make a world of difference in your sexual satisfaction. Even if you're not used to communicating about your likes and dislikes, learning to do so and providing feedback in a non-threatening manner can set the stage for greater sexual intimacy.
- **Practice healthy lifestyle habits.** Avoid excessive alcohol. Drinking too much will blunt your sexual responsiveness. Also, stop smoking and start exercising. Cigarette smoking restricts blood

flow throughout your body, and less blood reaching your sexual organs means decreased sexual arousal and orgasmic response. Regular aerobic exercise can increase your stamina, improve your body image and elevate your mood, helping you feel more romantic, more often. Finally, don't forget to make time for leisure and relaxation. Learning to relax amid the stresses of your daily life can enhance your ability to focus on the sexual experience and attain better arousal and orgasm.

- **Strengthen pelvic muscles.** Pelvic floor exercises can help with some arousal and orgasm problems. Doing Kegel exercises strengthens the muscles involved in pleasurable sexual sensations. To perform these exercises, tighten your pelvic muscles as if you're stopping your stream of urine. Hold for a count of five, relax and repeat. Do these exercises several times a day. Your doctor also may recommend exercising with vaginal weights — a series of five weights, each increasingly heavier, that you hold in place in your vagina — to strengthen pelvic floor muscles. You gradually work up to heavier weights as your muscle tone improves.
- **Seek counseling.** Talk with a counselor or therapist specializing in sexual and relationship problems. Therapy often includes education about normal sexual response, ways to enhance intimacy with your partner, and recommendations for reading materials or couples exercises. With a therapist's help, you may gain a better understanding of your sexual identity, beliefs and attitudes; relationship factors including intimacy and attachment; communication and coping styles; and your overall emotional health.

Medical treatment for female sexual dysfunction

Effectively treating sexual dysfunction often requires addressing an underlying medical condition or hormonal change that's affecting your sexuality.

Treating female sexual dysfunction tied to an underlying medical condition might include:

- Adjusting or changing medications that have sexual side effects
- Treating thyroid problems or other hormonal conditions
- Optimizing treatment for depression or anxiety
- Strengthening pelvic floor muscles
- Trying strategies recommended by your doctor to help with pelvic pain or other pain problems
- **Estrogen therapy.** Localized estrogen therapy — in the form of a vaginal ring, cream or tablet — can improve sexual function in a number of ways, including improving vaginal tone and elasticity, increasing vaginal blood flow, enhancing lubrication, and having a positive effect on brain function and mood factors that impact sexual response.
- Hormonal therapies won't resolve sexual problems that have causes unrelated to hormones. Because the issues surrounding female sexual dysfunction are usually complex and multifaceted, even the best medications are unlikely to work if other emotional or social factors remain unresolved.