

## Marriage and Sex

by [DiscoveryHealth.com](http://DiscoveryHealth.com) writers

If you're married or thinking about getting married, at some point or another you've wondered what better sex in marriage would be like or how sex in marriage could be improved.

Keeping the sexual spark alive in a marriage or in a long-term relationship is easier said than done. However, couples who take time to cultivate and maintain healthy and satisfying sexual relations tend to be more connected with each other and do not suffer from depression, heart problems and other health maladies, experts say.

The daily routines of life — whether careers, children or financial responsibilities — challenge couples to keep alive that flame that initially brought them together. From a practical standpoint, there's less time for sex and intimacy as relationships develop and individual partners take on more responsibilities.

Furthermore, aging brings on a host of physical conditions that can affect life in the bedroom. These include sexual dysfunction, cardiovascular conditions, arthritis and rheumatism, and a host of other problems.

Whatever the reasons for brewing trouble in the bedroom — whether emotional or physical in nature — the good news is that many such problems are easily treated. Moreover, troubles in a couple's sexual relationship are often signs of other problems, and can serve as a warning sign for still bigger troubles ahead.

"A good sex life is an important part of an individual's overall health," says Mark Schoen, Ph.D., director of sex education for the Sinclair Intimacy Institute. "People who have a good sex life feel better [mentally and physically]."

"Sex can be a wonderful cementer or a terrible wedge" for relationships, says Dr. Linda Banner, Ph.D., a licensed sex therapist specializing in marriage and relationship counseling and a researcher associated with Stanford University Medical School.

### Adults Have Sex 61 Times a Year

Adults, on average, have sex about 61 times per year, or slightly more than once a week, according to University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center. Marital status and age are key influences in sexual activity.

Sexual activity is 25 percent to 300 percent greater for married couples versus the non-married, depending on age. The 1998 University of Chicago report that compiled available sex research also concluded that intercourse is more frequent among couples in happier marriages.

### Overcoming Emotional Barriers

As people age, they tend to have sex less, regardless of whether they are in marriages or not. Married couples between ages 18 and 29 have sexual relations an average of nearly 112 times per year. That rate steadily decreases as people age, so that married couples aged 70 and older have sex 16 times a year on average.



But that fact shouldn't be misconstrued as meaning that older people are less satisfied with their sex life. An AARP survey released last year showed that most mid-life and older adults surveyed were either extremely satisfied or somewhat satisfied with their sex life, and felt it was an important quality-of-life factor.

Renowned sex researcher John McKinley, Ph.D., director of the New England Research Institutes in Watertown, Mass., says as people age, particularly men, their expectations about sex aren't as high.

"The worst thing that can happen to a relationship is that a sex life becomes routine and boredom sets in," Schoen says. But in today's fast-paced life, filled with dueling responsibilities, a sub-par or absent sex life is a common problem.

When physical problems are not the root cause of a diminished sex life, many remedies exist to rekindle the flame of passion. Much of the fix is grounded in communication and reprioritizing one's life to make time for love and sex, says Jan Sinatra, a Manchester, Conn., psychotherapist and co-author of "Heart Sense for Women."

Sinatra usually asks couples initially coming to her about their love life how they communicate. "It's a barometer of the relationship."

Sometimes couples need to focus on addressing unresolved conflicts between them, while other spouses just need to remember to have fun when the weight of life's responsibilities drags them and their sex life down. Still others may just need to build time into their schedules to be together and let nature take its course. Simply setting aside date nights can jump-start one's love life.

Through communication—both verbal and non-verbal — and listening, couples come to understand what ignites that spark in the other partner. That might be cuddling, leaving love notes for your partner to find, meeting at a motel for a tryst, trying out new sex techniques, introducing a vibrator or dozens of other potential turn-ons.

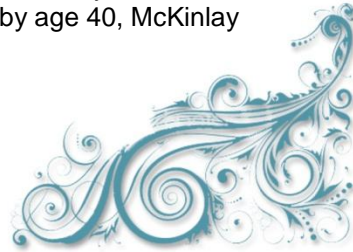
#### Overcoming Physical Barriers

Sex therapist Banner conducted a research study that included 65 couples who were having sexual problems because either one or both partners were diagnosed with sexual dysfunction or arousal problems. The average length of time these couples had been together was 24 years.

The study examined what it would take for these couples to resume normal sexual relations. For 65 percent of the couples, the introduction of educational sex videos was all that was needed to jump-start stagnant sex lives, Banner discovered.

Sexual dysfunction, however, is not necessarily something that is in one's head, and is a major reason sexual relationships suffer. Erectile dysfunction among men aged 65 and older is usually related to physical problems, says Dr. Michael Werner, a New York urologist, whereas most cases of erectile dysfunction for men under 65 are more psychological.

That's not to say there isn't a mental aspect to erectile dysfunction in older men. As with any medical condition, psychological issues also come into play. For men, much of their self-esteem emanates from how they feel sexually. Erectile dysfunction (ED) affects 25 percent of men either completely or moderately by age 40, McKinley says. By age 70, that increases to one out of two men.





More important, research in the last three to five years shows that impotence or sexual dysfunction is largely a physical problem, not an emotional problem. "Nearly everything we assumed in the last 95 years was totally wrong," says McKinlay. "E.D. is a circulatory problem, it's part of vascular disease...E.D. is an early warning sign of a heart attack.

In addition to cardiovascular conditions, depression, anxiety and prostate disease can also be factors in sexual dysfunction or sexual problems. And the bad news is that medications for these conditions negatively affect sexual functioning, creating a vicious cycle and making it harder to jump-start one's sex life, and possibly affecting a couple's overall relationship.

Viagra has replaced traditionally invasive treatments for men's sexual dysfunction, and McKinlay says new medications more effective than Viagra will soon hit the market. These will be easier to take, quicker acting and will not pose a cardiovascular threat as Viagra has shown to, he says.

#### Sexual Strategies

However, what works even better than Viagra for many men with erectile dysfunction, McKinlay says, is increasing one's physical activity, kicking the smoking habit, and watching one's weight and cholesterol. As erectile dysfunction is related to cardiovascular disease, such changes can also reduce the risk of the biggest killer of men in the world.

If that doesn't do it, then McKinlay suggests men work with their doctors to change medications before trying medication specifically for erectile dysfunction. As a last resort, a number of invasive treatments are available.

Meanwhile, older women experience reduced vaginal lubrication and reduced blood flow to sex organs, and the intensity of muscle spasms during an orgasm are diminished. These and other issues can be addressed through estrogen replacement therapy and something as simple as using lubricants.

Although some recommend and swear by such alternative therapies as ginkgo biloba or an amino acid called L-arginine for libido and erection problems, McKinlay says there's no scientific data that shows hormone supplements, herbs or dietary supplements work to address erectile dysfunction. However, that's not to say alternative medicine won't work, he adds.

#### Strategies for Keeping the Spark Alive

- Treat your partner as if you're dating
- Romance your spouse outside the bedroom
- Plan a date night
- Talk with your partner
- Listen to your partner
- Understand your partner's sexual needs and desires
- Keep physically fit and attractive for your partner
- Maintain perspective on sex as life ebbs and flows





- Resolve any underlying conflicts as they will spillover to the bedroom
- Have fun and engage in foreplay, whether that's kissing, sexual banter or anything else
- Be adventurous and creative in and outside the bedroom
- Exercise, preferably together
- Stop smoking and get your partner to quit
- Watch your weight and cholesterol
- Consider seeking specialized treatment from a specialist if behavioral changes don't work

