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REASONS

to have more

SEX

THE HEALTH BENEFITS OF A GREAT SEX LIFE ARE MYRIAD. BONNIE VAUGHAN GOES UNDER THE COVERS TO FIND OUT MORE

When you make sweet, sweet love, you're actually doing your mind, body and spirit a huge favour.

We asked three experts to break down the multiple health benefits that come with good quality sex.





It lowers stress levels

While you do build up a lot of tension during sex, experts point out that the release that comes with good sex is better at calming you down than any drug available. "The orgasm allows you to let go of that tension, and oxytocin is released in the brain," says sex therapist Tracie O'Keefe. "You're very calm and ecstatic after good sex. You feel peaceful and relaxed because you're out of the alarm stage."

In fact, adds sex therapist Jacqueline Hellyer, "Sex is 10 times more effective than valium. It's the most effective tranquilliser in the world." Studies even showed that people in regular, fulfilling sexual relationships were able to handle stressful situations better.

IT MAKES YOU LOOK YOUNGER

Forget the lasers and injectables – good sex is a veritable fountain of youth. After a decade-long study, neuropsychologist Dr David Weeks found that older men and women who engaged in active, regular sex looked between five and seven years younger than those who have sex less often.

The boost in circulation and the release of pleasurable endorphins and DHEA – the human growth hormone, which makes the skin more elastic – all play a role. ►



It's a natural antidepressant

When we have satisfying sex, our bodies are flooded with neuro-hormones which deliver high doses of feelgood responses that fight off depression and anxiety: dopamine, the reward hormone; serotonin, the ecstasy hormone; and oxytocin, the cuddle hormone. Endorphins, mood-enhancing neurotransmitters, are in turn triggered by the oxytocin.

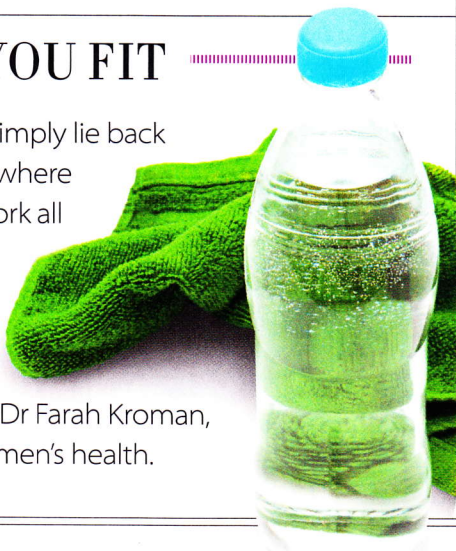
"You also experience a high level of melatonin at night, which is the hormone that helps you sleep more soundly and restfully," says O'Keefe. "And this means you are a much happier person the next day."

IT IMPROVES YOUR BLOOD PRESSURE

The cardiovascular benefits of sex increase the heart rate and blood flow through the body, says Kroman, which helps keep blood pressure in check and enhances heart health. What's more, a Scottish study revealed that committed couples who engage in regular sex tend to have lower diastolic blood pressure (the bottom number of your blood pressure reading).

IT KEEPS YOU FIT

But you've got to do more than simply lie back and think of England. Active sex, where you're switching positions, will work all your muscle groups, increase oxygenation in your blood and can burn up to 630kJ in half an hour. "It's good exercise and it improves your muscle tone," says Dr Farah Kroman, a GP with a special interest in women's health.



IT BOOSTS YOUR SELF-ESTEEM

"If you're having good sex regularly with someone you're involved with, it improves the strength of your relationship and makes you feel better about yourself," says O'Keefe.

Hellyer agrees, adding, "Sex is not just about what happens in the bedroom. It's about the whole day-to-day interaction with your partner. Mechanical sex isn't going to release the steady drip of happy hormones, but a quality relationship will keep the flow going."

IT STRENGTHENS YOUR PELVIC FLOOR MUSCLES

"If you do your Kegels [pelvic floor exercises] during sex," says Kroman, "it not only improves the sensations and satisfaction but it also improves your pelvic floor muscles, which leads to a reduction in incontinence later on." So during sex, switch on those muscles by contracting them – as if you were trying to stop the flow of urine – and you'll improve the experience for you and your partner.

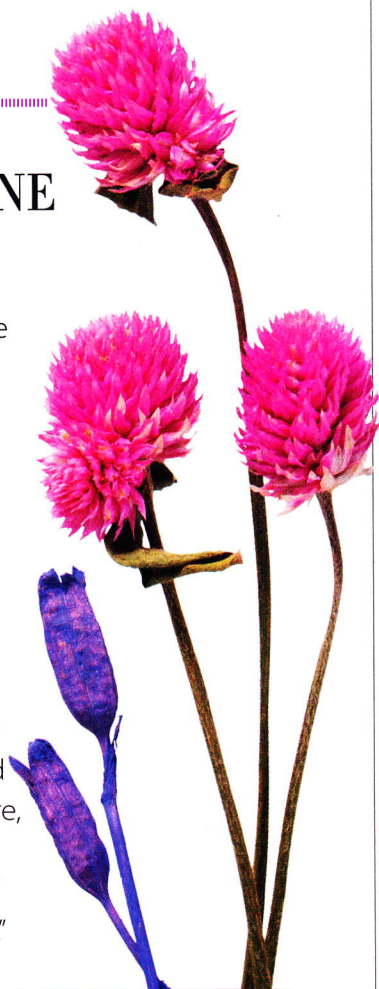


IT AIDS DIGESTION

"Sex increases the movement of food along the gut – the peristalsis in your gastrointestinal system," says O'Keefe. So go ahead, enjoy that pre-coital dessert!

IT ACTS AS AN ANTIHISTAMINE

Sex may not be a cure for hayfever or the common cold, but it will bring some relief. "Nasal congestion is caused by distention and irritation of the blood vessels in the nose," says Kroman. "Sex – and any other form of physical activity – leads to higher levels of adrenalin, which acts to constrict blood vessels, including those in the nose, to get the blood to places that need it more, making your nose less stuffy. Also, climax in itself gives a surge of adrenalin."



IT BOLSTERS YOUR IMMUNITY

According to a US study, people who have sex once or twice a week have higher levels of the antibody immunoglobulin A (IgA) than those who have sex less than once a week. "You also tend to recover from illness, disease or accidents better," says O'Keefe, "because you spend more time in the healing state than in the stress response state."

It increases oestrogen levels

During sexual arousal, oestradiol – the most potent form of the female sex hormone oestrogen – is released into the bloodstream, and its benefits are legion. It protects against heart disease, diabetes, osteoporosis, colon cancer, Alzheimer's and general cognitive decline. "Oestrogen makes your hair shinier and your skin softer," says Hellyer.

IT MAKES YOU SEXIER

It can seem like the ultimate irony: when you were single, you didn't get a second glance from men and now you're in a loving, sexually satisfying relationship, even the mailman is giving you the eye. The reason for this is both mental and chemical. "If you're engaged in regular, quality lovemaking, you're in a better state of wellbeing because you've got all those nice endorphins circulating," says Hellyer, "but you're also producing pheromones, the sex-attraction hormone."

IT RELIEVES PAIN

'Not tonight, honey, I have a headache,' isn't just a poor excuse, it's scientifically unsound. "You tend to forget about aches and pains when you're having sex because of the rise in endorphins, which are the pain-blocking hormones," says O'Keefe. A study by the Headache Clinic at Southern Illinois University in the US backs this up: half of a group of female migraine sufferers reported experiencing relief after orgasm. Another US study found that women with conditions such as arthritis obtained a higher pain threshold via regular orgasms. ❖