

Sexual Arousal

Sexual arousal is a process that helps our bodies prepare for sex. Sexual arousal involves a variety of psychological and physical changes. As our bodies become increasingly excited, breathing, heart rate and blood pressure increase. The pupils of the eyes dilate, the lips of the mouth darken, the nipples become erect, and the clitoris swells, becomes hard and exposed, (much like the aroused penis). With increased excitement, the skin becomes flushed and begins to sweat. In women, the labia, clitoris, vagina and pelvic organs enlarge in very much the same way as a penis does for men. Sometimes there is a plateau of excitement which is held for several minutes before you have an orgasm.

People become aroused in different ways. Some people become aroused spontaneously. However, others may need to become aroused *after they* start physical touching with a partner (or alone). Some will become aroused after they spend some time thinking about sex and/or fantasising about it.

Having sex without arousal can be uncomfortable and even unpleasant. For some, it may not even be possible. It is important to note that *sexual desire* (the motivational drive to want sex) is not always necessary for *sexual arousal*. Sometimes the order is reversed. Sometimes your body may become aroused in response to touching or foreplay – and then sexual desire is triggered by your body becoming aroused.

Orgasm

An orgasm is an emotional and physical experience that varies widely from individual to individual. Orgasm is the point at which all the tension is suddenly released in a series of involuntary and pleasurable muscular contractions that may be felt in the vagina and/or uterus (some women do experience orgasms without contractions). Subjective feelings of tension, pleasure and a momentary sense of 'being lost' in sensation and pleasure is often experienced.

Enjoyable sex and masturbation may or may not end in an

orgasm. Many people report enjoying sex even if they do not experience an orgasm. Although there can sometimes be pressure to experience an orgasm (from expectations on yourself or from your partner), this pressure can actually prevent the orgasm from happening! Finding a balance between exploring ways to experience an orgasm and appreciating all the other sensations during sex can lead to a more relaxed and enjoyable encounter.

Difficulties with arousal and what helps

Many people find it helpful to understand what helps them to get aroused. For example, certain kinds of touching or fantasies can trigger arousal. It is also helpful to understand what blocks arousal (e.g., lack of privacy, stress, arguments, anxiety). If you find that you are not becoming aroused, then it can be helpful to identify and explore what promotes arousal and what gets in the way of it. To explore what kinds of physical touch help with arousal, some people find exercises such as *sensate focus* or mindful self-practice/masturbation.

Some people might also find it helpful to explore some fantasies that can help them to become aroused. This is possible through reading erotic stories, watching films, remembering a situation where you felt aroused or visiting specialist shop that promote sexual pleasure and enjoyment.

Difficulties with orgasm and what helps

There are a variety of reasons why people struggle to have an orgasm. For some people, their bodies do not become aroused enough. For others, they don't know which parts of their body need to be stimulated. Exercises such as **sensate focus** and **mindful masturbation** can help with this.

Some women are able to have an orgasm by themselves, but having one with a sexual partner is difficult. If this is the case, it can be helpful to talk with your partner about what kinds of touch help you to have an orgasm. You may want to try different kinds of touch and stimulation.