

10 surprising reasons sex is good for you

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Power of love ... Unexpected benefits. *Source:* The Daily Telegraph

HERE is something to get you in the mood tonight: a 10-year Welsh study found that those who enjoyed an active sex life were 50 per cent less likely to have died during that time than those who did not.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to sexual health benefits, says body+soul's sex and relationships therapist Dr Gabrielle Morrissey.

"It makes sense that sex is good for you because we need lots of inducements to do it so that we stay on the planet," she says. "Sex involves our circulatory, nervous and muscular systems and brains, so it's a tune-up and workout of everything that's important."

Sadly, it's often the first thing to go when our health is on the blink. "We have the attitude that sex is a luxury item instead of a necessity for wellness. We also think of it as something only for the young and strong, but its effects are a bonus as we age."

Still need convincing? Here are 10 health reasons to ramp up your sex life:

1 Less heart attacks and strokes

Films often depict men having heart attacks in the throes of passion, yet the estimates of this happening are about one in a million. Research actually shows that having sex several times a week may cut your risk of a heart attack or stroke in half.

"Sex releases feel-good hormones such as dehydroepiandrosterone and oxytocin," says Dr Darren Russell, president of the Australasian Chapter of Sexual Health Medicine. "You get more blood moving through the blood vessels."

2 Lowers blood pressure and stress

A small Scottish study exposed people to stressful situations and found that those who had regular sexual intercourse responded better to stress than those who engaged in other sexual activities or abstained. A partner's hug can do wonders, too: a US study found it can lower blood pressure and heart rates in premenopausal women.

"Touch releases quantities of oxytocin, so you don't have to orgasm," Dr Morrissey says.

3 Reduces depression

Those feel-good hormones also help keep depression at bay, although US psychologist Dr Gordon Gallup found that women whose partners did not wear a condom during sex were less likely to be depressed than those whose did. His theory? Semen contains the hormone prostaglandin, which may be absorbed through the vagina and act like an antidepressant. But this doesn't mean you should avoid condoms, he warns.

4 prevents osteoporosis

"Men and women who have regular sex have higher testosterone levels, (which) are linked to a lower risk of osteoporosis and bone problems," says Dr Russell. More studies are needed.

5 Keeps colds and flu at bay

Lots of sex means fewer colds and flu, say researchers from Wilkes University in Pennsylvania, USA. They found that having sex once or twice a week increased production of the immune-boosting antibody immunoglobulin by a third. A German study found that even masturbation can increase men's white blood cells.

6 Prevents prostate cancer

Several large studies have shown that men in their 20s who ejaculate frequently (about 21 times a month) can reduce their risk of prostate cancer later in life by a third, compared to those who ejaculate five to seven times a month.

"It doesn't necessarily have to be intercourse," Dr Russell adds.

7 Relieves headaches

Research shows that sex can alleviate an aching noggin, especially in women. The endorphins and corticosteroids released have an analgesic effect, alleviating the pain of headaches, arthritis, cramps and body aches.

"Endorphins are a natural painkiller," Dr Russell says. The production of oestrogen in women may also ward off period pain.

8 Improves sleep

Dr Russell prescribes sex for people with sleep problems. "Sex helps people sleep better and is less addictive than things like Valium," he says. Again, it's those powerful oxytocins at work. In turn, sleep boosts mental and physical health.

9 Keeps you fit

Some experts say that 30 minutes of vigorous sex is comparable to 15 minutes on a treadmill or walking up two flights of stairs, and burns between 360 and 835 kilojoules. Sex works the pelvis, thighs, buttocks, arms, neck and thorax. Your pulse rate doubles from about 70 beats per minute to 150, the same as an athlete mid-stride.

10 Prevents incontinence

The muscles that stem the flow of urine, reducing leakage and incontinence, are given a workout during sex, says Dr Morrissey. "Orgasm is best because the entire pelvic floor contracts." Flexing your pelvic muscles during sex maximises the benefits and makes sex more pleasurable.

Use it or lose it

Regular sex keeps your genital organs in good working order, says Dr Darren Russell. Abstaining for long periods may cause the following:

Erectile problems in older men: A Finnish study of men aged 55 to 75 found that those who had intercourse less than once a week had twice the risk of erectile dysfunction than those who had sex more often.

Vaginal atrophy in women: A decline in oestrogen, especially during menopause, can result in the thinning and inflammation of the vaginal walls. "Once the oestrogen is gone, the vagina can atrophy and the

tissues can wither away," Dr Russell says.

This can cause pain and irritation if you return to sex after a long break. "Regular sex keeps the vagina lubricated and in good working order as a woman goes past the menopause." Vaginal oestrogen creams can also help.

More great reasons to say "Yes!" tonight:

Regular periods: US researchers found that women who have sex at least once a week have more regular menstrual cycles than those who have sex less often.

Look younger: In *Secrets Of The Superyoung* (Berkley), Dr David Weeks says his research found that couples who had sex three times a week looked seven years younger than those who had sex less often. Other researchers say sex raises a woman's oestrogen levels, making her hair shinier and her skin more supple.

Better skin and teeth: Some argue that the minerals in semen (such as zinc and calcium) help stop tooth decay and improve skin, but Dr Morrissey is not convinced.

"The kind of momentary exposure, even over a long, repetitive experience, couldn't possibly have any kind of impact, let alone the minimal number of minerals you're talking about."

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