

Get Your Libido Back

It's tough to get excited about sex when the Pill's killing your sex drive. Here's what the latest research says on how to reclaim it.

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The not-so-sexy truth: In the past decade, researchers have found that hormonal contraceptives—including the Pill, the Patch, and the vaginal ring—can dampen how often women want, think about, and even respond to sexual stimulation. And an online *Women's Health* poll backs that up: We found that 36 percent of you firmly believe the Pill muffles your mojo.

Unfortunately, no official stats are available on how prevalent this problem really is. When asked to estimate how many of their patients on the Pill have suffered a blow to their libido, doctors' answers range from 10 percent to 40 percent—though some sexual-health specialists argue that 40 percent is a lot closer to reality.

The phenomenon may be underestimated because many docs simply aren't clued in to the, well, ins and outs of their patients' sex lives. "Sex drive is not a subject most doctors are comfortable discussing, because it's not something they learn about in detail in medical school," says Irwin Goldstein, M.D., director of sexual medicine at Alvarado Hospital in San Diego. And while some European countries, including Germany, list decreased desire as a side effect on birth-control packages, there are no printed warnings about it in the United States.

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Why so horny?

So, what drives your love machine? A key component is testosterone. As a woman, you don't have enough juice to grow a goatee or develop a burning desire for an Xbox 360; but the amount you do have plays a role in your sex drive, especially just before ovulation (when you're most likely to get pregnant). Every month at midcycle, women's brains signal their ovaries, which create 50 percent of the body's testosterone, to produce a surge of the lust-stimulating stuff.

Testosterone also initiates blood flow that causes your girly parts to become plump and sensitive. This leads to lubrication and, with any luck, one hell of an orgasm (according to *Hormones and Behavior*, Canadian researchers report that women with higher levels of testosterone climax more often than those with lower hormone levels.)

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What's the holdup?

The problem is that some contraceptives alter the body's testosterone production—and not in a good way. This occurs for two reasons. First, the hormones in the Pill put the ovaries to sleep, halting ovulation. Conked-out ovaries can't produce testosterone.

Then your birth control renders the other 50 percent of your testosterone useless, thanks to the super-potent synthetic estrogen it contains. After you take each pill, your liver—convinced that you've consumed a potentially toxic amount of estrogen—starts pumping out a protein called sex hormone-binding globulin (SHBG). It works by glomming onto sex hormones (including estrogen, but also testosterone) like a mosquito to fly paper. As more of your testosterone glues itself to SHBG, less of it is available for your body to use. This "free" testosterone—whatever's produced that SHBG doesn't swallow up—partially determines your sex drive. In fact, a 2004 Boston University study found that subjects who reported the greatest sexual desire had higher levels of free testosterone.

Eat to please: [Try the Better Sex Diet](#).

Exceptions to the rule:

Now, even if you've been popping birth control pills since puberty, the artificial flux might never affect your sex drive. That's because the Pill lowers testosterone in all women, but it only lowers libido in some. To demo the discrepancy, experts cite a 1995 study in which British scientists gave 150 women either an oral contraceptive or a placebo for four months. (All subjects were unable to conceive, either because they'd had their tubes tied or they had partners with vasectomies.) For nearly half the women taking the Pill, sexual interest and intercourse frequency took a nosedive. However, sex drive did not stall for the others who took the drug.

"Unfortunately, we really don't know what the discriminating factor is," says Claudia Panzer, M.D., a female-sexual-dysfunction specialist and endocrinologist at the Canterbury Wellness Center in Denver. But theories exist. The most popular is that nonhormonal factors help keep your sex drive in high gear. For instance, not having to worry about getting pregnant may increase your arousal and, in effect, cancel out the Pill's libido-squashing potential, says Cynthia Graham, Ph.D., a researcher at the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction. The adrenaline rush of a budding relationship can also override the effects of low testosterone.

Virgin territory: [15 moments that define a relationship](#).

Get your libido back:

Ask your doctor to prescribe a different hormonal contraceptive: Ask for a new brand, a lower-estrogen pill, or the Patch. Even though all forms of birth control increase SHBG levels, 30 percent of women who switch somehow get their sex drive back (which may be just a placebo effect).

Shelf your pills for 3 to 6 months: That should allow time for you to notice changes in your libido. With no artificial hormones swimming through your bloodstream, your ovaries will wake up from their snooze and start producing testosterone again. (Obviously, you'll need a backup form of birth control if you do this and don't want the pitter patter of little feet pounding in your ears).

Ditch the hormones altogether: While it may not sound like the most cutting-edge remedy, it is what many doctors prescribe. "If you've determined that there's nothing else that might be impacting your sex drive, certainly the first thing I would recommend is a hiatus from the Pill," says Alan Altman, M.D., a sexual-dysfunction specialist and assistant clinical professor of obstetrics, gynecology, and reproductive biology at Harvard Medical School. Of course, some women need the hormones to help treat medical conditions such as endometriosis or ovarian cysts, so it's not an option for everyone. Plus, IUDs can be a long-term commitment, and messy barrier methods like condoms and diaphragms put an end to spontaneity faster than an 80-hour work week.

Consider which other mood-killing factors: Depression or stress might be playing a part in your sex drive. Some prescription medications, such as some antidepressants and drugs to treat hypertension have been shown to contribute to a low libido. Even antihistamines can dry out the vagina, making for painful intercourse.

Find a sexual-medicine specialist to help you discern the exact catalyst: Just knowing what's wrong can be enough to help ease your frustration and get you excited about the prospect of putting the whoop! Back in your whoopee. Once you're in the habit of generating some heat between the sheets, you'll feel more relaxed and confident—not only sexually but mentally as well. Just think of it as the sweet feeling of sex-cess.

<http://health.msn.com/health-topics/sexual-health/birth-control/articlepage.aspx?cp-documentid=100253970>