

Solo Sex: It's Fun, Relaxing, Educational, and Causes No Harm— and Having a Relationship Doesn't Mean You Should Stop

By Michael Castleman

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It's perfectly normal to masturbate. Here's an old joke: Ninety-eight percent of people have done it—and the other 2 percent are lying. Masturbation is fine at any age: 10, 25, 45, 105.

Masturbation is our original sexuality. It's one of the first ways children learn to experience physical pleasure. Left to themselves, children are enthusiastic masturbators. Why not? It's such fun. Kids stop masturbating (or more often, go underground and do it in secret) largely because the adults in their lives prohibit it and make them feel ashamed of it.

Who Has Masturbated in the Past Year?

While virtually everyone has masturbated at some point in their lives, recent masturbation is another story. University of Chicago researchers surveyed self-love among a representative national sample of 3,432 adults, aged 18 to 60. During the previous 12 months, 61 percent of the men and 38 percent of the women said they'd masturbated.

Causes No Harm

Forget everything you ever heard about hair on the palms, mental health problems, or physical harm. Masturbation causes absolutely no physical or emotional damage.

Physically, your biggest risk is a little chafing of tender genital skin during extended sessions. The solution: A lubricant. Try saliva, vegetable oil, or a commercial lube.

Psychologically, the main issue is the guilt many people feel about it after a youth spent hearing that masturbation is evil or perverted. It isn't. Every sex expert agrees: Masturbation is normal and healthy.

Masturbation Doesn't Sexually "Use You Up"

Masturbation does not use you up sexually, even if you do it more than once a day. At birth you're not given some predetermined number of orgasms, and once you run through them, that's it. There is no limit on the number of orgasms healthy people can experience. There may be a limit on the number you want to have, but you can have as many as you wish.

Masturbation does not use up men's sperm or semen. The testicles are always making sperm and the prostate gland and men's other reproductive glands are always making seminal fluid. The only way men run short on sperm is if they become sterile. The only way men run out of semen is if they have their prostate glands removed, and even then they can still experience orgasm. If a man masturbates several times in a day, he might notice that his final orgasm produces less semen than his first one did. But if he refrains for about a few days, seminal fluid builds up and ejaculatory volume returns to what it was.

Do Vibrators "Ruin" Women for Sex Without Them?

Some women fear that masturbation with a vibrator might "ruin" them for any sex without the intense stimulation vibrators provide. Relax. Does driving ruin you for walking? No, it just gets you to your destination faster. The same is true for sex with and without vibrators. The vulva, clitoris, nipples, and other parts of the body respond to erotic stimulation no matter where it comes from: fingers, tongue, penis, or vibrator. Vibrators produce the most intense sensations, so most women reach orgasm faster than they do with other types of stimulation. But using a vibrator—even frequently—does *not* change women's ability to respond to other types of sexual stimulation.

“Addicted” To Vibrators?

Some women fear that they might become “addicted” to their vibrators. No way. Over time, some women become particularly fond of vibrator stimulation. That’s a personal preference, not an “addiction.”

In fact, far from ruining women for sex that does not include them, vibrators actually *help* women respond to other forms of erotic stimulation. Vibrators allow women to experience the full range of their sexual responsiveness. Greater sexual self-knowledge learned with a vibrator usually helps women respond to other types of sexual stimulation.

Losing Its Stigma

Available evidence suggests that masturbation is more socially acceptable—at least in private—than it was 35 years ago. German researchers gave the same sexuality survey to German university students in 1966, 1981, and 1996. In it, they asked about masturbation. Over these three decades, both the men and the women started masturbating in their teens. In the 1966 survey, 20 percent of the women said they were masturbating at age 15. At age 19, the figure was 30 percent. By the 1996 survey, those figures had increased to 60 percent and 85 percent respectively. In the 1966 survey 50 percent of the men said they were masturbating at age 15. At age 19, the figure was 85 percent. By the 1996 survey, those figures had increased to 80 percent and 95 percent. It’s not clear from this survey if young people actually begin masturbating earlier, or if they are simply more willing to admit what has always been true. Either way, these surveys suggest that young people feel more comfortable about solo sex. Whatever the reason, the researchers concluded that “masturbation is losing its stigma.”

In a Relationship? You Don’t Have to Stop Masturbating

However, when people become involved in sexual relationships, some think it’s wrong to continue masturbating, that it should no longer be necessary. That’s like saying there’s no reason to go to the movies once you have Netflix. While both masturbation and partner sex are sexual, the two experiences are quite different, just as the big screen and a TV or computer screen produce different entertainment experiences. As wonderful as partner sex can be, it also involves responsibilities. You have to be sensitive to your lover, provide pleasure, and provide coaching about what turns you on, not to mention that you probably have to make sexual compromises to maintain peace in the relationship. “But in masturbation,” explains Palo Alto, California, sex therapist Marty Klein, Ph.D., “there’s no one else to

attend to, no one making any demands, no one to please except yourself—and even if you’re in a fabulous relationship, at times, or quite often, that can feel wonderful.”

The German researchers mentioned earlier also asked about masturbation in the context of relationships. Again, over the three decades, masturbation became more acceptable. In the 1966 study, 72 percent of the men and 43 percent of the women admitted that they enjoyed solo sex while in a committed relationship. By the 1996 study the figures had increased to 92 and 71 percent respectively.

Masturbation as Sex Education

In addition to being our original sexuality, masturbation is how people learn about their own sexual responsiveness. The vast majority of people masturbate for years—maybe decades—before meeting their lovers. Why give up chocolate cake once you’ve discovered apple pie? Partner sex doesn’t *replace* masturbation. The two are *complementary*.

Many psychologists say you can’t love another person until you learn to love yourself. By the same token, you can’t have great sex with anyone else until you learn to have great sex with yourself. In sex therapy for several common problems—including rapid ejaculation in men and lack of orgasm in women—masturbation is a fundamental part of standard treatment.

If It Interferes With Your Life...

While masturbation is perfectly normal and nothing to feel guilty about, it also has implications for the rest of your life. It’s possible that frequent, obsessive masturbation might interfere with school, work, or other life necessities. Masturbation is a healthy, enjoyable part of life, but like other diversions, it may cause problems if it becomes your major focus. If you have difficulty reconciling your masturbation with the rest of your life, counseling is a good idea.

Masturbation may also cause relationship problems. “The two members of the couple may attach different meanings to it,” says San Francisco sex therapist Linda Alperstein, L.C.S.W. “For men, masturbation is often simply an enjoyable way to relax, a form of self-comfort. But some women see it as a form of unfaithfulness. I suggest that couples check in with each other about what masturbation means to them.”

It's also possible that frequent masturbation might mean less interest in partner sex. From time to time, it's fine to prefer making love with yourself rather than with your honey. But if you frequently use masturbation to avoid partner sex, that's usually a sign of a relationship problem. Consider couples counseling or sex therapy.

Lovers in committed relationships need to work out a sexual frequency they can both live with comfortably—and work their masturbation around it. It's reasonable to curtail masturbation somewhat in the interest of maintaining a mutually agreeable frequency with your lover. You might schedule partner sex in advance, and not masturbate that day or for a day before. But it's unreasonable for one member of a couple to demand that the other stop masturbating entirely. People have every right to masturbate. There's nothing wrong with it at any age or in the context of any relationship.

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