

Six Keys to Getting in Shape for Great Sex

By Michael Castleman

Mention great sex, and you probably *don't* visualize a long walk, eating a salad, meditating, or getting an extra hour of sleep. But the fact is, boring, old, not-particularly-sexy health advice significantly boosts libido, and enhances sexual functioning and pleasure. Of course, a reasonably happy relationship is a prerequisite for deeply satisfying sex. But beyond spousal contentment, each lover's physical condition plays an important role in erotic interest and fulfillment. Want hot sex after 45? Then:

- Get regular exercise, the equivalent of a at least a brisk, 30- to 60-minute walk a day.
- Eat a plant-based diet . Eat at least five daily servings of fruits and vegetables, and preferably seven to nine. Eat less meat, fewer whole-milk dairy products, and less junk food.
- Maintain recommended weight for your height and build.
- Incorporate a stress-management program into your life.
- Don't smoke.
- Don't have more than two alcoholic drinks a day.

Physiologically, enjoyable sex requires:

- A healthy nervous system, so you can feel pleasure fully, and respond robustly to sexual stimulation.
- A healthy heart and blood vessels (cardiovascular system), so that sufficient blood can flow into the genitals for erection in men, and clitoral sensitivity and vaginal lubrication in women.
- Deep relaxation, which opens the mind to erotic enjoyment, and allows the nervous and cardiovascular systems to function at their sexual best.

Healthy-lifestyle recommendations support the physiology of good sex. Here's how:

Engage in Regular Moderate Exercise

Massachusetts researchers surveyed 1,709 men over 40 about sex and lifestyle. Those who exercised the most reported the greatest sexual satisfaction, and the fewest sex problems, notably erection impairment.

Exercise improves arterial function, which helps extra blood flow into the genitals. It boosts sex-fueling testosterone levels in both men and women. It contributes to weight control, promotes deep relaxation, reduces insomnia, elevates mood, and contributes to feelings of self-esteem and well-being, all of which enhance libido and sexual satisfaction. In women, regular moderate exercise also minimizes premenstrual syndrome, menstrual cramps, and the discomforts of menopause.

It hardly matters what type(s) of exercise you choose. Do anything you enjoy—or used to enjoy: walking, swimming, yoga, dancing, tennis, gardening—whatever. Just do it for the equivalent about at least 30 minutes a day, ideally every day, and at least several times a week.

It's never too late to begin to exercise. Studies have shown that even 90 year olds who have been sedentary all their lives show improved health and fitness with modest exercise.

Regularity of exercise is more beneficial than intensity. It's better for sex and overall health to take daily 45-minute walk than it is to hike five miles twice a month.

As you plan your exercise program, don't forget horizontal workouts. Sex is exercise equivalent to strolling or light stretching. Sex takes about as much energy as walking up two flights of stairs. It burns 100 to 150 calories an hour.

Eat a Plant-Based Diet

Eat less meat, fewer whole-milk dairy products, and less junk food, and more fruits, vegetables, beans, and whole grains. You don't have to become a vegetarian. But the closer you are to one, the better your sex life is likely to be.

University of South Carolina researchers checked the cholesterol levels of 3,250 men, aged 25 and up, and then surveyed their sex lives. The higher the men's cholesterol, the more likely they were to report sexual dissatisfaction and erection dysfunction.

Forget the myth is that eating beef is manly. The saturated fat in means and whole-milk dairy foods accelerates the growth of deposits that narrow the arteries, limiting blood flow into the genitals. Cholesterol and saturated fat are found in animal products: meats, egg yolks, and dairy foods. They also abound in fast foods, junk food, fried foods, and rich desserts.

Want to do it like a rabbit? Then eat like Bugs Bunny—lots of carrots and other fruits and vegetables. They contain no cholesterol or saturated fat. Instead, they contain antioxidant nutrients that help keep the cardiovascular system healthy. And healthy blood flow around the body helps keeps the nervous system healthy, too.

It's easier to being transforming your diet than you might think. Have some fruit with breakfast. Eat at least one salad a day. And one night a week, instead of a meat-centered meal, try a hearty vegetable-bean soup. Make a big pot and you also get a few lunches.

Get Serious About Weight Control

Researchers at the Duke University Diet and Fitness Center program surveyed the sexual effects of weight loss on 70 participants. Moderate weight loss—10 to 30 pounds—significantly improved both men's and women's libidos, sexual functioning, and satisfaction.

Another study in Minneapolis followed 161 obese women and 26 obese men, average age, 45. They were all enrolled in a weight loss program. After two years, they lost 13 percent of their body weight (26 pounds for those who weighed 200). Before and after the study, and every three months during it, the participants completed surveys about many aspects of their quality of life, including how they felt about their sex lives. Before the study, 68 percent of the women said they felt unattractive. One year later, only 26 percent did. Initially, 63 percent of the women said they did not enjoy having their lover see them undressed. By the end of the study, only 34 percent felt that way. These figures were similar for the men.

It's possible to be overweight and still enjoy a wonderful sex life. But the research shows that weight loss improves sex. Brown University researchers surveyed the sexual frequency and satisfaction of 32 overweight women as they enrolled in a physician-supervised weight-loss program. They lost an average of 56 pounds. In a subsequent survey, more than half reported greater sexual frequency and satisfaction.

Sexuality is one way the body celebrates vitality. Increased interest in sex and improved sexual function is the body's way of saying "thanks" for losing weight.

It's not easy to lose weight, especially over age 40. But regular exercise and a plant-based diet help. Exercise burns calories and increases your basal metabolic rate, the rate at which the body burns calories while at rest. A plant-based diet is low in fat, which also helps in weight control.

Avoid quick weight-loss schemes. Instead of major lifestyle changes over the short term, adopt modest changes you can live with over the long term, for example, a brisk daily half-hour walk, and a vegetable-bean soup for dinner one night a week. A reasonable weight-loss goal is two pounds a month. At that rate, you lose 24 pounds in a year.

Embrace a Stress Management Regimen

In one recent survey, 60 percent of Americans said they felt "under significant stress" at least once a week. Stress is also a major cause of sex problems in both men and women. Stress reduces blood flow into the genitals. It releases two hormones (cortisol and adrenaline) that depress testosterone levels. It increases risk of anxiety and depression, both major sex killers. And it increases risk of cardiovascular disease.

The antidote to stress is a regular stress-management program. Proven stress relievers include: exercise (aerobic or nonaerobic, e.g. yoga), meditation, music (playing or listening), massage, laughter, hot baths, gardening, having a pet, visualizing relaxing scenes, and spending quality time with friends, family, or a lover. Incorporate one—or more—into your daily life. Ideally, combine them: Exercise with friends. Bathe with your spouse.

Get A Good Night's Sleep

Blame it on Thomas Edison. Before electric light, most Americans took Ben Franklin's advice: Early to bed, early to rise. A 1910 survey showed that the average American slept nine hours a night. Then in 1913, Edison introduced his light bulb. Americans continued to get up early, but they started staying up later—and sleeping less.

There is no "normal" amount of sleep. Individual needs vary. But experts agree that the vast majority of adults need at least seven hours a night to function optimally. Many need eight or more.

Meanwhile, half the nation's adults experience occasional insomnia, and millions suffer chronic sleep problems serious enough to need sleep medication.

Sleep problems contribute to sex problems. Insomnia depresses libido and testosterone levels. It also contributes to anxiety and irritability, which interfere with libido and sex appeal.

Sleep problems become more prevalent with age. Time spent in deepest sleep declines. But regular exercise has been shown to boost sleep quality. Quitting smoking also helps. Nicotine is a stimulant. Limiting alcohol also helps. Alcohol disrupts sleep.

Quit Smoking

The ads portray smoking as sexy. In fact, it's the opposite. Since the mid-1980s, 19 studies involving 3,800 men have investigated the connection between smoking and erection dysfunction. Researchers at the University of California, Irvine, analyzed their results. About one-quarter of Americans smoke. But among men with erection problems, considerably more are smokers—40 percent. And if smoking hurts erection in men, it has similar sex-killing effects in women.

Smoking damages the cardiovascular system. It raises blood pressure and accelerates the growth of artery-narrowing deposits that reduce blood flow to the genitals. Smoking is also associated with sex-impairing nerve damage, especially among diabetics. And it's linked to sedentary lifestyle, obesity, and sleep problems, all contributors to sex problems.

The good news is that while risk of lung cancer remains high for years after quitting, the sexual--damage caused by smoking largely disappears a few years after quitting.

If you smoke, talk with your doctor about quitting.

If You Drink Alcohol, No More Than Two Drinks A Day

In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare wrote that alcohol “provokes the desire, but takes away the performance.” Truer words were never penned. Alcohol is by far the world's leading drug cause of sexual impairment.

When people of average weight drink more than two beers, cocktails, or glasses of wine in an hour, alcohol becomes a powerful central nervous system depressant that interferes with sexual responsiveness in both men and women. (A "drink" is one 12-ounce beer, one shot of 80-proof spirits, or five ounces of wine, a standard wine glass about half full.)

If you drink more than two drinks a day, or if you ever binge on alcohol—five or more drinks in one sitting—consult your doctor for advice on drinking less.

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