

## Sexual Healing: Sex Is Good for Health

By Michael Castleman

Years ago, Marvin Gaye had a hit with “Sexual Healing.” The song dealt with the emotional benefits of lovemaking. True enough. But sex is also *good for physical health*. Here’s what the latest research shows:

### **Fitness**

Fitness involves three elements: stamina, strength, and flexibility. Many people focus on stamina (aerobics) and strength, but don’t put much effort into flexibility. However, exercise physiologists agree that flexibility—moving the joints through their full range of motion—is as important as stamina and strength. Leisurely, playful sex gently moves many joints through their range of motion. This helps fitness in general, and it’s therapeutic for musculoskeletal injuries and particularly for osteoarthritis.

### **Deep Relaxation**

Good sex involves whole-body sensual massage. Massage is deeply relaxing. So are sex-related deep breathing and orgasm. The deep relaxation obtained through sex is very similar to the physiologic relaxation that comes from meditation, biofeedback, yoga, tai chi, and other stress management regimens. Meditative relaxation has been shown to help treat an enormous number of physical ailments, among them: pain problems, asthma, high blood pressure, heart disease, depression, and arthritis. Regular sex with a loving partner offers similar benefits.

### **Pain Relief**

Sex helps relieve pain in two ways. First, it’s an enjoyable distraction. While having sex, people focus less on their pain—and as a result, suffer less. In addition, as a form of gentle exercise, sex releases endorphins, the body’s own pain-relieving compounds. One of the nation’s most prevalent chronic-pain conditions is osteoarthritis. The Arthritis Foundation recommends regular sex to help control arthritis pain.

## **Mood Elevation**

Good sex is certainly a feel-better activity. For those with a tendency to feel depressed, sex is an effective mood-elevator. The endorphins released during sex not only relieve pain, but also have a mood-improving, antidepressant effect. Massage is also a mood-enhancer. Good sex includes whole-body massage.

## **Immune Enhancement**

Regular moderate exercise boosts immune function, which helps prevent all manner of illness. Sex is moderate exercise, so it, too, boosts immune function. In a study at Wilkes-Barre University in Pennsylvania, researchers found that compared with those who have sex less than once a week, people who enjoy sex once or twice a week are less likely to catch colds. This finding was surprising because colds are passed by close personal contact, so you'd expect sex to increase risk as lovers pass their colds to each other. But the researchers found that something else outweighed the risk-raising effect of close contact. It was immunoglobulin A (IgA), a component of the immune system that helps the body defend against colds. Sex raises IgA levels significantly enough to account for the finding that sex helps prevent colds.

## **Stress Incontinence**

Many women suffer from stress incontinence, urine leakage when they cough, sneeze, or laugh. The reason is that the muscles that control the urinary sphincter weaken and can't keep urine in against the pressure produced by coughing, sneezing, and laughing. In 1948, Arnold Kegel, M.D., developed Kegel exercises to help resolve stress incontinence. Kegels involve tensing and relaxing the muscles used to cut off urine flow, or to squeeze out the last few drops. These very same muscles are also involved in orgasm. Kegels not only cure stress incontinence, they also increase the intensity of orgasm. Try Kegels in sets of 10 three or four times a day.

## **Menstrual Problems**

A few studies have shown that regular sex—once a week or so—helps relieve menstrual cramps and promotes menstrual regularity. In addition to its pain-relieving action, sex subtly alters the balance of women's sex hormones, which helps resolve menstrual complaints.

## **Longevity**

Exercise, immune enhancement, and deep relaxation are all associated with longer life. Sex incorporates all three, so it should come as no surprise that regular sex helps extend life. That's what British scientists at the University of Bristol discovered in a study of some 900 middle-aged men. Compared with those who had

sex once a month or less, those who reported it twice a week had only about half the death rate.

Critics argued that the association between sex and longevity might not be causal. Health generally leads to greater sexual frequency, so perhaps it's overall health and not sex that prolongs life.

But the researchers took care to correct statistically for this possibility. Comparing the men with low, medium, and high sexual frequency, there were no significant differences in age, smoking, weight, blood pressure, or heart disease, all of which have major impact on longevity. The researchers' conclusion: Sex helps prevent death in middle-aged men.

Of course, no one makes love simply because it's health-enhancing. But the health benefits of sex are a little extra that can make it more fulfilling. And if you like making love to music, try playing "Sexual Healing." It's a catchy tune—and it's true.