

Does Hysterectomy Affect Women's Sexuality?

By Michael Castleman

Hysterectomy, the removal of a woman's uterus, is the nation's number one gynecological surgery, and ranks among the nation's most frequently performed operations. More than 600,000 women have hysterectomies every year, typically women in their forties. Currently, one American woman in four has had a hysterectomy.

Two Controversies

Hysterectomy is controversial. Most are performed to treat fibroids, fibrous, noncancerous growths in the uterine wall that may cause bleeding and discomfort. Fibroids typically go away by themselves at menopause, and critics of hysterectomy charge that many are performed unnecessarily. In Western Europe, fibroid-related hysterectomy is performed much less frequently than it is here.

But there is another hysterectomy controversy—its effects on women's sexuality. The conventional wisdom is that hysterectomy does not affect sexuality, and that if it has any effect, the operation *improves* sex. The theory is that once women are freed from the bleeding and abdominal discomfort caused by fibroids, they can revel in increased sexual desire, enjoyment, and satisfaction. But some women complain that after hysterectomy, they experience a variety of sex problems: decreased desire, problems with arousal and orgasm, and a decrease in sexual satisfaction. What's going on?

Most Studies: No Sexual Impact

Most published studies support the conventional wisdom of no sexual impact, or sexual enhancement. Three reports are typical:

- Dutch researchers asked 352 married women to complete a questionnaire dealing with their sex lives before they had hysterectomies. Six months after

surgery, the women were surveyed again. No matter which of the three types of hysterectomy they had, their overall sexual satisfaction improved. Thirty-two were not sexually active with their partners before surgery. Afterwards, 17 returned to having sex. The medical press hailed this study as good news.

- Researchers at the University of California, at San Francisco, followed 63 women with fibroids. Some were treated with hormonal drugs. Others had hysterectomies. Before and six months after treatment, the women completed surveys dealing with their sexuality. The women who had surgery reported improved quality of life, and more sexual desire. Half of the women taking drug treatment eventually requested hysterectomy.
- At Northwestern University, 70 women were surveyed before and six months after hysterectomy. Seventy percent of them said the operation had either no effect on their sexuality, or that it increased their sexual desire and satisfaction.

But On Closer Examination...

However, behind all this good news, lurks some not-so-good news:

In the Dutch study, about 40 percent of the women reported some post-hysterectomy sex problems: loss of lubrication, difficulty with arousal, and feeling less sexually sensitive and responsive.

In the San Francisco study, compared with the drug group, women who had hysterectomies were twice as likely to report “interference with sex.”

And in the Northwestern study, if 70 percent experience no sexual impact or improvement, then 30 percent experienced sexual impairment.

The Latest Research: Sex Problems Happen

Recently, sex researchers have entered the fray. In 2004, two reports were published that shed new light on the controversy surrounding the sexual impact of hysterectomy.

At the University of Texas, at Austin, researchers worked with 15 women who had hysterectomies, and 17 who did not. All the women inserted standard instruments into their vaginas that allowed researchers to measure their physiological arousal in

response to erotic videos. Overall, the differences were not statistically significant, but the hysterectomy group registered somewhat lower vaginal responsiveness, suggesting the possibility of sexual impairment.

The most comprehensive investigation of the sexual effects of hysterectomy was a report by Dutch researchers (a different group than in the study mentioned above). They describe several ways that hysterectomy might interfere with women's sexuality:

- Hysterectomy sometimes shortens the vagina, which may cause the woman pain during intercourse.
- The uterus is involved in orgasm. It's muscular tissue contracts during orgasm. Without a uterus, the uterine component of orgasm is lost.
- Hysterectomy severs some of the nerves that service the vaginal wall. These nerves are involved in production of vaginal lubrication and blood engorgement of the vaginal wall. After hysterectomy, some women notice a loss of lubrication. A loss of blood engorgement might reduce sexual sensitivity and change how women experience sex.
- Hysterectomy may also contribute to hormonal changes that affect sexual function.

The Dutch group criticized studies of hysterectomy outcomes for their generally simplistic notions of sexuality. For example, in two of the three studies discussed above, some of the women experienced a significant loss of sexual function, but these results were ignored in the "good news" conclusions.

Any Sexual Outcome Is Possible

So where does this leave us? It appears that many women enjoy an increased quality of life after hysterectomy, especially those who had the operation to treat fibroids that were causing them problems. Increased quality of life often included improved sex: greater desire, easier arousal, and greater sexual satisfaction.

However, it's also apparent that some women's hysterectomies leave them sexually handicapped. This has been under-reported and deserves more publicity. Women should know that sexual impairment is a possible side effect of hysterectomy.

Help

If you would like individualized help dealing with sex after hysterectomy, consult a sex therapist. To find one near you, visit aasect.org, the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists, or sstarnet.org, the Society for Sex Therapy and Research.

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