

Vibrators: Myths vs. Truth

By Michael Castleman

Vibrators are by far the most popular sex toy. Sexual enhancement product catalogs offer dozens of models. According to one recent survey, one-third of adult American women own at least one vibrator. In other surveys, women laud vibrators for enhancing both solo and partner sex. But some women wonder if they might be harmful in some way, and many women who don't use them avoid them for fear of harm. It's time to set the record straight.

Myth: Vibrators are for loners and losers.

Truth: According to a recent survey by Chicago psychologist and noted sex researcher Laura Berman, Ph.D., director of the Berman Center, which specializes in women's sexual health, about one-third of women now use vibrators—and women in relationships are *more* likely to use them than single women. According to a 1997 survey by sex researchers at the University of California, San Francisco, 10 percent of American couples use vibrators in their partner sex—and that number is growing as elderly lovers, who are the least likely group to use vibrators, die off, and as younger people, who are more open to vibrators, become sexual. Both of these surveys shows that vibrator users are a demographic snapshot of middle class America, typical in every way, except that they enjoy using sex toys for erotic play. Rural women are as likely to use them as urban and suburban women. Low-income women are as likely to use them as high-income women. The only variable that affects vibrator use is education. As education increases, so does the likelihood of vibrator use.

Myth: If a woman needs a vibrator to have an orgasm, there's something wrong with her.

Truth: Absolutely not. According to the Berman survey, vibrators just make it easier for women to become aroused and have orgasms. They also significantly improve women's sexual satisfaction.

If a woman needs a vibrator, she's perfectly normal. She just may have difficulty having an orgasm without the intense stimulation vibrators provide. Or it might take her an uncomfortably long time without one. Many women are in this situation. They are sexually normal in every way. They just need a little extra boost, the kind vibrators provide. There's nothing wrong with that. Just like there's nothing wrong with a carpenter who uses power tools. Electric tools don't mean the carpenter is any less skilled. Power tools just help get the job done faster, more efficiently, and more enjoyably.

According to a 1999 report in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, about 25 percent of adult women have difficulty having orgasms, or can't have them. Fortunately, sex therapists enjoy great success teaching women how to have the orgasms that are waiting to be released inside them. If you cannot have an orgasm, or have difficulty, read the excellent self-help book, *Becoming Orgasmic*, by two distinguished sex therapists, Julia Heiman, Ph.D. and Joseph LoPiccolo, Ph.D. Guess what this book recommends as part of the learning process? A vibrator. *Becoming Orgasmic* has also been turned into a fine video, available from www.bettersex.com.

Myth: If a woman needs a vibrator to enjoy sex and have orgasms, there's something wrong with the way her man makes love.

Truth: Not necessarily. To repeat, some perfectly normal women simply cannot have orgasms without the intense stimulation vibrators provide. Others can, but it takes them much longer than they or their lovers would like. Of course, couples should discuss the kinds of erotic play they enjoy, and coach each other about what turns them on. Men should also make love more slowly than many do, and more sensually, with an emphasis on whole-body massage that includes the genitals, but is not fixated on them. That's what women generally prefer. And it's what sex therapists recommend for couples who say they are not getting as much out of sex as they'd like. Assuming a man engages in leisurely, playful, creative, whole-body sensuality—and pays erotic attention to the woman's clitoris—there is absolutely nothing wrong with him or the couple if the woman needs, or prefers, to use a vibrator and have her orgasms with one.

Myth: If a woman needs a vibrator to enjoy sex and have orgasms, the man is left out.

Truth. Absolutely not. A vibrator provides one—and only—one thing, unusually intense erotic stimulation. A vibrator cannot kiss or hug, massage or embrace a

lover, warm the bed, tell jokes, say, “I love you,” listen to a lover’s troubles, share a lover’s triumphs, or any of the other thousand things lovers do to support each other, and enjoy one another’s company. Vibrators don’t replace men. No way. All they do is provide especially intense erotic stimulation.

Most women prefer to hold the vibrator in their own hands and stimulate themselves with it. The reason is that vibe sensations are so intense that if not carefully controlled, they might cause discomfort and shatter the woman’s erotic focus. It’s possible that a woman might teach a man how to work the vibrator for her optimal enjoyment. But most women prefer to do this themselves. That’s fine. While a woman is enjoying her vibrator, the man can hold her close, kiss and hug her, massage other parts of her body, and tell her he loves her. Those gestures add a great deal to the woman’s experience of lovemaking, and help her enjoy her vibrator even more.

Myth: Vibrators are unnatural.

Truth: Vibrators don’t grow on trees. They’re manufactured, so in that sense, they are not “natural.” But vibrators are as natural in lovemaking as any other erotic enhancement: candle light, music, lingerie, little snacks, perfume, or any of the many little extras lovers enjoy.

Myth: Vibrators are addictive.

Truth: Are power tools addictive? No, they just get the job done faster. It’s true that many women *really love* their vibrators. But that’s a personal preference, not an addiction. A true addiction involves the development of a tolerance—over time it takes more and more of the addictive agent to obtain the desired effect. That’s not true with vibrators. In fact, over time, as women become more comfortable with vibrator use and the full range of their own erotic responsiveness, many women find that it takes *less* vibrator stimulation to give them the enjoyment they want.

Myth: Vibrators ruin women for sex without them.

Truth: 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 a 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 your body’s

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

Myth: Vibrators numb the genitals.

Truth: This is possible. Intense vibrations can numb the skin. Motorcyclists sometimes experience numbness of the thighs. Jackhammer operators sometimes develop numbing of the arms. If a vibrator causes any numbing, don't press it so hard into the skin. Back off a little and move it to a slightly different location nearby. Once you stop using the vibe, any numbing quickly resolves.

Myth: Vibrators cause urinary tract infections.

Truth: Bacteria cause UTIs, not vibrators. These bacteria come from the digestive tract, and exit the body through the anus. As a result, the anal canal and the area immediately adjacent to the anus can be contaminated with UTI-causing bacteria. If a vibrator (or penis, finger or tongue) comes in contact with these bacteria, and then touches the vulva, where the urine tube (urethra) opens up, the bacteria can travel up the urethra and cause a UTI. To prevent this, keep track of where your vibrator (and penis, fingers, and tongue) go. If they come near the anus, don't use them to touch the vulva—or wash thoroughly before you touch the vulva. While vibrators may play a role in transmitting UTI bacteria, this can be easily prevented. It's not vibrators, per se, that are the problem, but rather their careless use.