

New Insights About the Clitoris

By Michael Castleman

Quick: What is the clitoris? Where is it? The standard view is that the clitoris is the little bump of erotically sensitive, orgasm-triggering tissue nestled outside the vagina above the vaginal opening beneath the upper junction of the vaginal lips.

Actually, the clitoris is much more than that. But unfortunately, for some 500 years, the clitoris has been minimized, misrepresented, and misunderstood. It's time to rehabilitate the clitoris and see it for what it really is—an organ as large and multifaceted as the penis, just arranged a little differently.

Women's Genitals—All of Them

Our term “clitoris” comes from the Greek *kleitoris*, meaning the female genitals—all of them, more than just the little nub we know as the clitoris today. The ancients knew more about the female genitals than many modern folks. One of the foremost ancient Greek physicians, Claudius Galen, said, “All parts that men have, women also have. The only difference is that in men, they are on the outside, in women, on the inside.” Modern anatomists have proved him correct, so correct, in fact, that we need a new term to describe the parts of the clitoris other than the little bump. Let's call this collection female erotic body parts the “Clitoral System.”

Introducing the Clitoral System

Just as all parts of the penis and its surrounding tissue can become sexually aroused, the same goes for all parts of the Clitoral System. Many men would feel erotically short-changed if a lover focused only on the head (glans) of the penis and ignored the shaft and scrotum. By the same token, many women feel short-changed when their lovers focus only on the clitoris and not the entire Clitoral System.

The penis and Clitoral System develop from the same germ cells. At eight weeks of fetal development, they appear virtually identical. The bump of the clitoris is the

equivalent of the glans of the penis. But just as the penis is more than its head, the Clitoral System is more than the clitoris.

More Sensitive to Touch Than the Penis

The clitoris holds some 7,000 sensory nerve endings, more than the glans of the penis, in fact, a greater concentration of touch-sensitive nerves than any other structure in the body. This concentration of sensory nerve endings makes the clitoris more sensitive to touch than the penis. It's the reason why many women feel discomfort, even pain, when their clitoris is fondled in any way other than *very* gently. Even when fondled gently, direct pressure on the little bump with a finger, lips, tongue, penis, or sex toy may be hard to take. There is nothing wrong with women who feel this way. If a woman has a super-sensitive clitoris, a lover should fondle *around* it, not directly on it.

The Clitoral Shaft

Under the clitoris, is another part of the Clitoral System, the clitoral shaft. It's analogous to shaft of the penis, only much smaller. Like the penile shaft, it contains spongy erectile tissue. When women become sexually aroused, the clitoral shaft fills with blood and becomes longer and firm. In some women, this is visible. The erect clitoral shaft pokes out from between the top junction of the vaginal lips. However, in other women, the clitoral shaft is no more visible when sexually aroused than when not. There are two possible reasons for this. In some women, although they feel highly aroused, the clitoral shaft does not lengthen enough to be noticeable. In other women, the vaginal lips become so blood-engorged and swollen that they continue to cover the clitoris, even though the shaft has become firm and longer.

As the penis becomes erect, a ligament in the lower abdomen, the suspensory ligament, causes it to stick out or up. Women also have a suspensory ligament, which is part of the Clitoral System. It tightens during sexual arousal and typically retracts the flap of tissue that covers the clitoris, the clitoral hood, exposing the clitoris as it becomes erect.

The Clitoral Hood

The clitoral hood is analogous to the foreskin of the penis. Just as the foreskin retracts when the penis becomes erect (assuming it has not been removed by circumcision), in most women, the clitoral hood gets pulled upward by the

tightening suspensory ligament as a woman becomes sexually aroused, allowing the growing clitoris to become more prominent and visible.

The Inner Vaginal Lips

The inner vaginal lips are also part of the Clitoral System. Like the clitoral shaft, they also correspond to the shaft of the penis. The inner vaginal lips contain a great many nerve endings sensitive to erotic sensation. Some women say their inner lips are actually *more* erotically charged than their clitoris. The inner lips also contain some erectile tissue. As women become sexually aroused, the inner lips often extend outward beyond the outer lips and separate, providing easier access to the sensitive area between them, and to the vaginal opening.

Inner lips vary enormously in appearance: in color from pale pink to burgundy or even gray, in shape from thin and narrow, to fluted, to thick and fleshy. Some women feel self-conscious about theirs, thinking they don't look like they "should." But inner lips come in all shapes, sizes, and colors. In the words of noted sex educator Betty Dodson, Ph.D., of New York City, producer of the video, *Viva the Vulva*, the inner lips are snowflakes—all unique, all beautiful.

The Urethral Sponge and G-Spot

While men's erectile tissue is concentrated in the shaft of the penis, women's is distributed throughout the Clitoral System. A good deal of female erectile tissue occupies the area between the inner vaginal lips, particularly around urethral opening, about halfway between the clitoris and the vaginal opening. This area is known as the urethral sponge. When its erectile tissue becomes engorged with blood, it bulges somewhat and becomes firm. But the bulging is hardly visible externally between the vaginal lips. Instead, the urethral sponges bulges inward, around the pubic bone, causing a little mound in the front vaginal wall. This mound can be felt on the inside of the vagina, about two inches in from the vaginal opening, on the upper vagina when a woman lies on her back. It's the G-spot, yet another facet of the Clitoral System. But the G-spot isn't really a spot. It's the internal manifestation of the erotically aroused urethral sponge. It may be as large as a quarter coin.

The Perineum and Anus

Below the vaginal opening is the perineum, the little bridge of skin that separates the vagina from the anus. The perineum and anus mark the lowest portion of the Clitoral System. Both can become very sensitive to erotic caresses, thanks to

several muscles that surround the Clitoral System, the pelvic floor muscles. The most widely known of these is the pubococcygeus, or PC, the one that contracts when women (or men) squeeze out the last few drops of urine. The PC also contracts during orgasm. The PC is the muscle strengthened by Kegel exercises, which increase the power and pleasure of orgasm. In addition to the PC, there are also other pelvic muscles that form a figure-eight around the vaginal opening and anus. That's why many women enjoy anal massage and fingering, and why a small proportion of people also enjoy gentle anal intercourse. The musculature around the anus is part of the Clitoral System. (In men the pelvic floor muscles form a figure-eight around the base of the penis and the anus. Many men, both homosexual and heterosexual, also enjoy anal sphincter massage, and anal fingering, and a small proportion enjoy gentle receptive anal intercourse.)

The Paraurethral Glands

Between the inner vaginal lips, around the female urethral opening are a group of tiny paraurethral glands ("para" means around). On orgasm, some women produce fluid similar to male prostatic secretions. Not all women produce this fluid, and among those who do, the amount varies from a few drops to considerably more. The fluid is female ejaculate, similar to male semen, except that it lacks sperm.

The Outer Vaginal Lips

The outer lips develop from same embryonic tissue as the scrotum in men. They are not part of the Clitoral System, just as the scrotum is not part of the penis. However, the outer lips are just as erotically excitable as the scrotum.

The Vagina

Most people consider the vagina a key female sex organ, sometimes, the only one. Actually, it is *not* part of the sexual Clitoral System—except to the extent that the G-spot is accessible through it. For women, the vagina is a *reproductive* organ. However, it's a *sex* organ for men because it receives the penis during intercourse.

Vaginal intercourse certainly provides many women with sensual pleasure. It allows the woman and her lover to share a special intimacy, and many women enjoy the sensation of feeling filled, and holding the man's erection inside them. Intercourse also produces some indirect stimulation to the various parts of the Clitoral System, allowing about some—but by no means all—women to experience orgasm during vaginal intercourse. Nonetheless, the vagina is more of a sex organ for men than for women.

Ancient Wisdom Abandoned

As early as 500 B.C., Chinese and Indian sex treatises mentioned female ejaculation, and from ancient Greek times until the 18th century, the penis and Clitoral System were considered to be equivalent organs in all aspects, except for their arrangement.

But after 1700, the concept of male-female genital and sexual equivalence began changing. Over the next few centuries, physicians and anatomists increasingly viewed women as “less sexual” than men, and came to deny the very existence of the Clitoral System. By Victorian times in the latter half of the 19th century, women were viewed as not sexual at all, but merely passive recipients of men’s lust. The clitoris was reduced to the little nub the term connotes today. Sigmund Freud went so far as to tout the completely erroneous notion that only immature, neurotic women have “clitoral orgasms,” while mature, mentally healthy women have “vaginal orgasms.” In fact, all orgasms involve contraction of the pelvic floor muscles. Depending on the circumstances, orgasms can feel different. But they all involve rhythmic contraction of the same muscles.

What accounted for this misrepresentation of women’s sexuality? No one really knows. Feminists say it had to do with the rise of modern obstetrics and gynecology, when male physicians seized control of women’s medicine from midwives. Some historians contend that the change reflected the rise of the modern industrial state, the transition from men and women working side by side as approximate equals in agriculture to a division of labor with men as breadwinners and women as homemakers. Whatever the case, the ancients’ appreciation of the Clitoral System faded.

The Clitoris Resurrected

It was not until the mid-20th century that William Masters, M.D., and Virginia Johnson refuted Freud’s notion of the vaginal orgasm, and began to restore the clitoris to its rightful place in women’s sexuality. But they did not fully connect it to the Clitoral System.

It wasn’t until the 1980s that sex researchers Beverley Whipple, Ph.D. and John Perry, Ph.D, documented female ejaculation and the G-Spot. And only since the 1980s have sexuality authorities come to a renewed appreciation of the full extent of the Clitoral System. Nonetheless, most people still view the clitoris as the little

bump tucked under the apex of women's inner vaginal lips. The full extent of the Clitoral System remains to become fully repopularized.

So what is the clitoris? And where is it? The clitoris is the little nub, but the Clitoral System encompasses the entire vulva, from the clitoral hood to the anus, and has surprisingly little to do with the vagina.

Finally, why are so many women sexually frustrated, nonorgasmic, and unfulfilled? Perhaps because they and their lovers don't fully appreciate the wonder and beauty of the Clitoral System.

References:

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