

Sex & sexual health

Sex and sexual health play an important role in the health and wellbeing of people from puberty onwards. There are physical, psychological and social factors – such as a person’s past sexual experiences, their physical and mental health, or how a person identifies their own sexuality – that affect our experiences of sex:

Physical	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Overall level of health and wellbeing• Normal ageing• Health issues and some medications, such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) for depression• Changes in hormone levels, eg oestrogen and testosterone – these can affect mood, sexual desire and the physical changes that occur during arousal.
Psychological	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Beliefs and feelings about yourself• Mood (depression, anxiety, grief)• Self-esteem• Body image• Personal history, including past experience of sex• Relationship satisfaction.
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is considered appropriate (eg what age to start your sexual life)• Your environment (eg lack of privacy for you or your partner, working long hours)• Cultural influences and expectations about what is an appropriate sexual response and identity.

Sexual problems

About three out of five of women in Australia report one or more sexual problems. Sexual problems (often called sexual dysfunction) are usually defined to mean you are not able to experience sex as you would wish and this causes you distress.



Problems often relate to:

Arousal

The physical response to sexual thoughts or activity such as lubrication and swelling of the genitals

Libido

The desire to take part in sexual activities either with a partner or yourself

Orgasm

The climax of sexual excitement, characterised by pleasure centred in the genitals

Frequency

How often you take part in sexual activities

Pain

- low abdominal or pelvic pain
- pain on the vulva or entrance to the vagina. This may be pain that occurs with intercourse or inserting a tampon, or it may occur on its own.

Contraception

Contraception to avoid pregnancy is recommended from the time you start to become sexually active until one to two years after menopause (one year after your last period).

Permanent contraception may also be an option.

Finding the right contraceptive for you will depend on your health, age, relationship needs and future plans, such as whether you have decided not to have any children, or no more children, and whether you are perimenopausal (in transition to menopause) or postmenopausal.

Withdrawal (pulling out the penis before ejaculation) not a reliable contraception method because sexual fluids can be released before ejaculation (pre-ejaculatory fluid).

What is safer sex?

The exchange of body fluids can occur with vaginal sex, anal sex, oral sex, and the use of sex toys. Safer sex is where semen, vaginal secretions or blood are **not** exchanged between partners.

Unprotected sex with your regular partner will only be safe as long as you are both only having sex with each other.

Sexually transmissible infections (STIs)

An STI is an infection spread from one person to another during sex. STIs include chlamydia, herpes, gonorrhoea, human papillomavirus (HPV – the cause of cervical cancer), pubic lice, syphilis, genital warts and hepatitis B. Anyone can catch an STI, whatever their sexual orientation or age, so knowledge of safer sex practices is important and should be considered for all new relationships.

- Have a check-up for STIs before having sex with a new partner
- Use condoms and dams (latex rubber sheets used for oral sex)
- Talk to partners about sexual health.

What's important?

A good sex life for women is related to:

- the quality, communication and expectations of your relationship
- past sexual experiences
- appropriate contraception and safer sex
- a lack of pain with sex
- awareness, support and ability to talk about sex with people you trust.

For more information go to jeanhailes.org.au/health-a-z/sex-sexual-health

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This fact sheet is designed to be informative and educational. It is not intended to provide specific medical advice or replace advice from your medical practitioner.

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Jean Hailes for Women's Health takes a broad and inclusive approach to the topic of women's health. This fact sheet generally uses the terms 'women' and 'girls'. These terms are intended to include women with diverse sexualities, intersex women, and women with a transgender experience.

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