



Libido

"Each person's sex drive is like an appetite: Some people spend their whole life in the kitchen and think about food all the time; some people can skip lunch."

As a rule, men don't like to skip lunch. But that's only the beginning of the story.

What Is Sex Drive?

Sex drive -- the way men and women think about sex and engage in sex -- is a slippery concept. Researchers have a hard time quantifying it: Is it how often we think about sex? How often we want sex? How often we become aroused or actually have sex? Sex drive is all that, and more.

"Sex drive, which scientists now call sexual desire, is one of the most difficult to define," says Patricia Koch, PhD, associate professor of Biobehavioral Health & Women's Studies at Pennsylvania State University and adjunct professor of human sexuality at Widener University. Sexual arousal is easily identifiable -- for men it shows up as an erection, in women, lubrication (and enlargement of the clitoris). "But desire is not just about arousal or frequency -- how often you have sex can depend on so many other circumstances and opportunities: whether you have a partner or not, whether you like your partner," says Koch.

Many couples cannot agree. Driscoll says half of all marriages experience some discrepancy in desire at some point, and it's usually men who have a higher sex drive. About one in five women report that their husbands have turned them down for sex, Driscoll says, while half of all men say their wives have turned them down.

"For men, we know one thing: The absence of sex makes them unhappy. For women, it is not as problematic."

Men Think About Sex More Than Women

"When sociologists ask 'How often do you think about sex?' the responses show pretty dramatic differences between men and women," says Laumann. "The majority of males between 18-to-59 of the U.S. population report that they think about sex at least once a day -- one third think of it several times a day. Only 25% of females report thinking about it every day," Laumann says.

But maybe some of that difference in sex drive may simply result from the fact that what turns women on is quite different -- and less explicitly sexual -- than what turns men on. "I have had women say 'What turns me on is when my husband cleans up after dinner and takes out the garbage -- then my interest for sex is piqued,'" says Koch.

Taking Care of Others Can Dampen Sex Drive

"One of the most intriguing obstacles to desire is caretaking," says Esther Perel, a couples and family therapist in New York City, and author of *Mating In Captivity: Reconciling the Erotic and the Domestic*. Women today are largely the caretakers -- of the children, the husband, and the home, even if they, too, work outside the home. Why does this sabotage sex drive? Caretaking makes you think about others, while desire hinges on your being able to think about yourself and your own needs. "Desire is rooted in autonomy, freedom, and selfishness. If you can't be selfish, you can't have an orgasm," Perel says.

Men's and Women's Sex Drives Work Differently

Men and women travel slightly different paths to arrive at sexual desire. "I hear women say in my office that desire originates much more between the ears than between the legs," says Perel. "For women there is a need for a plot -- hence the romance novel. It is more about the anticipation, how you get there -- it is the longing that is the fuel for desire," Perel says.

Men, on the other hand, don't need to have nearly as much imagination, Perel says, since sex is simpler and more straightforward for them.

That does not mean that men do not seek intimacy, love and connection in a relationship --- they do, just as women do. They just view the role sex plays in that relationship differently. "Women want to talk first, connect first, then have sex," Perel explains. "For men, sex is the connection. Sex is the language men use to express their tender loving vulnerable side," Perel says. "It is their language of intimacy."

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What Can Couples Do to Get Their Sex Drives in Sync?

It is only normal for sex drive to ebb and flow, and couples should not be overly alarmed to find that their sex drives do not always match up. However, if differing levels of desire is causing consistent unhappiness for one or both partners, it is important to resolve it. “You both have to be happy with your level of sexual activity,” says Barbach.

Talk it over in a calm, neutral setting.

Start talking -- but not right after one person has just been turned down in his or her romantic advances. Wait for a neutral time and do it in a non-charged setting -- outside the bedroom. If opening the conversation feels awkward, get a book about sex and read it together. Look at the pictures, laugh -- break the tension. Let your partner know that you're open to making things better between you. That's half the battle.

Avoid name-calling.

He is not a “sex fiend” just because he wants more, and she is not a “nymphomaniac” if she wants more, or “frigid” when she wants less. If you are in a committed relationship, and you want it to work, you both have to recognize that it is perfectly normal for sex drives to differ. The important thing is for you both to enjoy the sex you have together -- however and whenever you do.

Both parties have to give a little.

Therapists seem divided about who has to try to adapt his or her sex drive to the other's. “Whoever wants more sex is the one who has to make the most adjustments,” insists Driscoll. Other therapists say the opposite: “The general rule of thumb in sex therapy is that the person with the least desire has to figure out how to enjoy it more -- have more sex, come to a negotiation,” says Pepper Schwartz, PhD, a professor of sociology at the University of Washington and past president of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality. Clearly, the best thing to do is meet in the middle.

Allow for physical affection that does not lead to sex.

Go out of your way to touch each other in affectionate, but not explicitly sexual ways. Do not let a day go by when you do not say hello or goodbye with a kiss. Touch each other playfully as you pass in the hall. Cuddle with the clearly-stated agreement that this will not lead to sex so as to take the pressure off the less libidinous partner. Hug until you feel relaxed. These tokens of affection will build the bond between you -- and the electricity as well.

Schedule sex dates.

Knowing that on a designated day, you will be having sex, will bring relief to both parties. No one has to face the humiliation of being rejected, or the anguish and guilt of disappointing their partner.

Yes, you have to give up the notion that sex is only hot when it's spontaneous. But a sure thing can be just as satisfying. And the process of planning can build anticipation. Take pleasure in the details, from the mood music to the lingerie, and make sure there will be no interruptions for at least two hours.

Court your partner -- presents help.

“Men have to court women with gifts and good manners to get them in the mood -- every animal in every species does it,” says Driscoll. Among chimpanzees, he says, “the male gives the largest share of the kill to a fertile female” so he can be assured of sex.

Though perhaps found less in nature, men like presents, too. Both partners need to remember how solicitous they were of each other when they first met and always strive for that kind of respect and generosity of spirit.

Try whole-body stimulation -- and take it slow.

For men, sexuality tends to be focused disproportionately on the genitals. Slowing lovemaking down and focusing on the other erogenous zones can give a woman the time she needs to become aroused and receptive, and can help ease performance pressures for men. Be pleasure oriented not goal oriented.

Surprise fuels sex drive.

Be imaginative and playful. Change rooms, try the couch. Take a look at some of the newer erotic literature and films that include female fantasies as well as male. Share your fantasies with each other -- acting them out only if both of you are comfortable with the scenario. A fantasy doesn't have to be anything more than imagining what you wish someone would do to give you pleasure. Start small ... and build.

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Reduce Stress in Your Lives

Stress can be the ultimate sex drivesapper. Help each other play more and work less -- go for hikes, take long weekends away. Even if things are going badly at work or with the kids, try to separate those issues from what is going on between you as a couple. "Desire is a healthy form of entitlement -- when you don't feel deserving, you shut down," Perel says. And once you've helped each other relax a little, remember sex itself can be an excellent stress-reliever.

Get outside help

People go to golf and tennis clinics -- so why not sex therapy to improve your game in the bedroom? Also consult a doctor to see if there may be a medical reason behind your dissatisfaction with your sex drive. There may be alternative drugs for depression and other conditions that can have less of an impact on sex drive. And just as poor health inhibits male and female sex drive, good health resulting from increased exercise and improved diet can help restore libido.