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Monday, July 25, 2005

HEALTH & FITNESS

Sex is good for you!

Benefits include a boosted immune system, stress relief and better sleep

By John Powell Metz Scripps Howard News Service
 Posted Tuesday, July 26, 2005

So, did you have a good weekend? A really good weekend? (wink, wink)

If so, then you did a lot of good for your body and mind — you reduced stress, burned calories and tickled your brain with euphoric chemicals.

But if the weekend was less than a home run in the bedroom, you might be suffering from guilt, insecurity or the blues.

Two experts on sex and relationships offer their two cents about the health benefits and possible complications of lovemaking.

James Houran, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist who specializes in dating and romance and directs studies at True.com, an online relationship service.

Louanne Cole Weston, Ph.D., is a licensed marriage and family therapist, board-certified sex therapist and contributor to WebMD's Sex Matters.

(Of course, for a healthy sexual experience, it's crucial to be tested for sexually transmitted diseases and use protection. And nonconsensual sex can have serious psychological and physical consequences.)

Sex and the mind

During sex, the brain releases the chemicals dopamine and norepinephrine, which create a feeling of euphoria.

A healthy sex life makes people less argumentative at work, and parents who are regularly intimate tend to set a healthy example by behaving with more affection in front of their children.

"I'm constantly encouraging my clients to have hugs in the kitchen," Weston said.

But it's hard to keep that honeymoon bliss going.

"You know when you're first married, that honeymoon phase where you're playful," said Shelly Carrigan, 27. "(Sex) keeps you in that fun, playful phase."

Sex also can help keep married couples connected.

"There's work, children, schedules," said Carrigan, mother to a 9-month-old girl. "When you're married, you have love and companionship and friendship, and sex brings that all together."

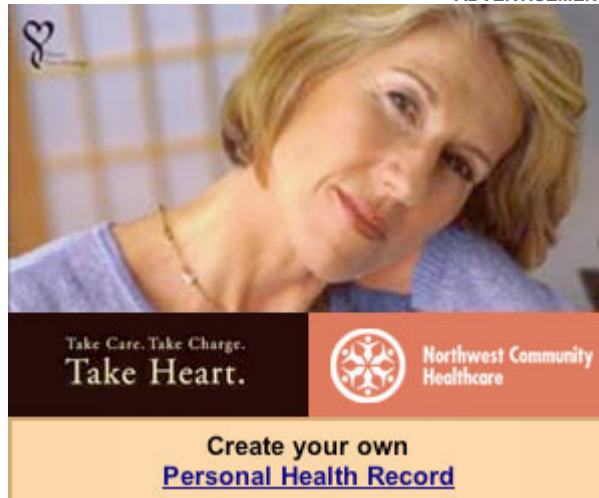
Recently, researchers have found some truth behind the often-scoffed-at condition of lovesickness, Houran said.

In fact, this feeling of drunken pleasure, caused by the natural high of dopamine, is very real, with both positive and negative effects.

The mind functions differently for men and women right after climax, Houran said.

Men go through a refractory period that women do not experience, and this discrepancy explains why men want to sleep while women want to cuddle.

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"It's not just a bad joke; that's true," he said.

But sex isn't necessarily all exhilaration and snuggling.

Houran and other researchers conducted an extensive study last year of the so-called "Valentine's Day Blues Syndrome," a phenomenon that occurs when a man or woman does not receive a token of affection after a romantic Valentine's Day. Men rebound from this feeling in about two weeks, but women's depression tends to worsen over time.

Another potentially problematic aftereffect of hanky panky is guilt, Houran said, particularly if the participants gave in to the heat of the moment without thinking the decision through.

Generally, men deal with guilt by confronting the problem, while women behave more passively. Men think, "Uh oh, what is she thinking this meant?" while women ask themselves, "What does this mean to our relationship?"

Sex and the body

Half an hour of sex burns 46 to 53 calories, depending on the level of vigor. That's roughly the same as 15 minutes of bowling or 35 minutes of standing. Not too impressive, eh?

"Sex is no substitute for regular, moderate exercise," Weston said.

But it does have a few physical benefits.

For one, it flexes the difficult-to-work pubococcygeus, or PC, muscle group, a hammock-like area that holds abdominal organs in place in men and women.

After climax, the PC muscles contract about six to eight times, a bit more often than once a second. The effects of such toning can't be seen by the naked eye, but women with stronger PC muscles have better bladder control and stronger orgasms.

Sex also can relieve arthritis and headaches because it releases endorphins, the body's own pain reliever, and cortisone, a chemical with an anti-inflammatory effect. And many women cite sex as an effective way to lessen migraine pain, Weston said.

Post-menopausal women who are sexually active have a lower risk of osteoporosis because they produce more estrogen.

And, expectedly, intercourse is a sound cure for insomnia as the body experiences strong relaxation after orgasm.

A common myth about a physical risk of sex is that it can trigger heart attacks, a notion Weston dismissed.

She said researchers have shown that about one in 50,000 heart attacks occur during sex, roughly on par with the odds of having an attack while waking up in the morning.

Some people do work harder at making whoopee than others, though, and those people need to look at why, Weston said.

If having sex wipes someone out, he or she should try harder to use his/her mind to become aroused so that the body does less work. This trick will particularly benefit cardiac patients by helping them relax.

"It's not a good idea to rush back into sex simply to prove you can. Some people do that and increase the risk of sexual problems and chest pains if they're stressing over trying to prove they can do it," Weston said.

Weston also cites a 1992 study at the University of Akron in Ohio that followed married couples in which one member was recovering from a heart attack. The research found that when one member would comfort the other with hugging and/or intercourse, the recovery was actually quickened.

And in post-menopausal women, that release of estrogen into the blood that accompanies sex also can prevent heart attacks, Weston said.

In general, stress reduces one's ability to fight infection and disease. So because sex reduces stress, it helps maintain a healthier immune system.

Of course, sex also comes with many important risks, such as the possibility of contracting HIV, syphilis or gonorrhea. But why are many of the positive effects so unknown?

"Our culture is pretty scared about the power of sexual energy, and we suppress it and put it aside," Weston said. "Ideology is prevailing over science, research and data."

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