



Not in the mood? You're not alone – women are having less boom in the bedroom than movies and magazines would have us believe. But you can learn to *love* loving, writes Charmaine Yabsley

For the past 10 years, men who have lost their bedroom mojo have been able to reach for a magic blue pill that magically erased erectile dysfunction. Now it seems women are set to receive assistance in the lovin' department, from a pill promising to have us swinging from the chandeliers. Aimed at women who report symptoms of female sexual dysfunction (FSD), low libido or lack of desire, or hypoactive sexual desire disorder (HSDD), German pharmaceutical company Boehringer Ingelheim's Filbanserin is awaiting the US Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) stamp of approval before hitting the mainstream, where it would rev users' sexual appetites by altering brain chemicals linked to desire. The question is, does not wanting to rip your partner's clothes off at every opportunity mean there's something to be fixed? And, if so, is a tablet really the answer?

Since the advent of Viagra in 1997, many men have benefitted from its ability to restore sexual function. However, on the other side of the bed, many women have been left, er, high and dry. A recent survey from Western Australia's Deakin University found that more than half of Australian women have difficulty getting sexual satisfaction. According to the researchers, rates of sexual desire in

Australian women were similar to those shown in international studies, but local women appeared to have more problems with arousal and orgasm.

Do we need a magic tonic?

"They don't," says Dr Cindy Pan, a GP and sexual health education spokesperson for Pure Romance Australia. "A lack of interest in sex could be related to low self-esteem, poor body image, weight issues, concerns over stretch marks. Some women may not feel confident about their sexual response or their ability to please their partner, Dr Pan says. Or it may be due to external factors, such as "issues to do with your relationships. If you're experiencing conflict, resentment, anger, frustration, difficulty with communication, or a lack of trust in the relationship, this will affect a woman's desire to be close, physically, with another person".

"With women, sexual desire is probably more complex than just taking a tablet," says Dr Pan. "They've been talking about a

What is FSD?

Female sexual dysfunction (FSD) disorder covers four conditions: lack of sensitivity or ability to be aroused, called female sexual arousal disorder; inability to have an orgasm, known as female orgasmic disorder; and pain during sex (which may be due to vulvodynia, endometriosis, or cystitis). It afflicts up to a quarter of women at some point in their lives. The inability to climax can lead to a build-up of blood around the womb, heavy bleeding and even back pain. If you have trouble becoming aroused, find sex painful and don't lubricate, then speak to your doctor for diagnosis and advice.



HEALTH

A Canadian study published in *Hormones and Behavior* found that women with higher amounts of testosterone climax more often than those with lower levels of the hormone.

Viagra for women for years, but studies have shown that it won't work.

"Most women need to be wooed and courted, for at least 24 hours, in order to get into the mood. A pill alone won't necessarily solve entrenched problems in the relationship, or within themselves. That's why almost anything could have a placebo effect."

Remember that, over time, our libido does rise and fall, according to our current situation. "Some of us become complacent, or feel inadequate or overburdened," says Dr Bella Ellwood-Clayton, a sexual anthropologist and author of *Sex Drive: In pursuit of female desire*. "Others redirect their passion to their children or their careers. For many of us, our expectations of passionate long-term monogamy are unrealistic. We can't let movies dictate the way our love life should operate. In reality, it is natural for desire to become less central to our relationship over time," Dr Ellwood-Clayton says.

So why aren't we at it like rabbits?

There are various reasons for our depressed desire: our busy lifestyles, stress, lack of time, illness, children, hormonal changes and pain during sex. And this may be affecting our sex lives. In a landmark study, researchers from La Trobe University, The University of Sydney and the University of New South Wales reported that 24.9 per cent of men and 54.8 per cent of women had a lack of interest in sex. In the same study, heterosexual couples who had been together for at least a year reported they had sex on average 1.84 times a week, but most wanted more.

So why do we think everybody else is at it, hammer and tongs? "There are

Libido lifters



Intercourse isn't the be all and end all of coupling. "It's more important to be open to sexual gestures from partners," says Dr Pan. "By introducing less-threatening actions, or physical activity which may not require input from the woman – such as massage, or kissing and holding hands – a woman will find this comforting without pressure. This can be helpful and increase bonding and emotional atmosphere. Once this is sustained a woman may be able to find it easier to be turned on."

LET'S TALK ABOUT SEX

A study published in the *Journal of Sexual Medicine* found that talking to your GP may help improve your sex life. The researchers found that women who spoke to their GP about their concerns reported greater satisfaction with their sex lives. "The biggest sexual organ is the brain," says Dr Pan. "It's very much a psychological thing; physically you need things to be in order, but the biggest factor is mental and psychological. As long as you have meaning and satisfaction, from whichever source it comes from, then at some stages sexual desire and response will follow."



HAPPY HERBS

"Black cohosh helps regulate oestrogen levels and provides symptomatic relief from hot flushes or vaginal dryness typically after two weeks," says

Lesh Hechtman, president of NHAA. "Other herbs to try for mood swings and/or night sweats include a combination of zizyphus and St John's wort. These two herbs help women feel more balanced and regulate circadian rhythm."

PELVIC FLOOR MUSCLES

Your pelvic floor muscles are not just for helping you to hold your bladder. They're also essential for helping you to experience an orgasm. Tighten your pelvic floor muscles throughout the day. Imagine a 'pulling up' sensation in your vagina.

L-ARGININE

Known as the natural Viagra, L-arginine provides nitric oxide, which helps to relax muscles and widen blood vessels. For men, this may help with their ability to get an erection; for women, their genitals can become more engorged and responsive.

TRY HOMEOPATHY

Homeopathic remedy *staphysagria* may help if you're experiencing pain.

CHILLI PEPPERS

Containing capsaicin, chilli's can help improve your sex drive, as the chemical in them helps speed up blood flow and encourages an endorphin release similar to arousal.



DAMIANA

This Mexican herb mimics the female hormone progesterone to help regulate sex drive.

DARK CHOCOLATE

Chocolate contains antioxidants, and studies have shown that these increase levels of nitric oxide, a chemical believed to turn men and women on. Puts a whole new spin on a hot Milo, doesn't it?

MUIRA PUAMA

This herb can elevate your levels of serotonin and is ideal for men, as it's believed to stimulate the production of testosterone.

GET VACUUMING

It seems a few minutes of Hoovering can have a positive effect on your sex life. A US study found that men and women who did housework for 45 hours and 68 hours a week, respectively, had differing sex tallies, with the cleaning enthusiasts doing the deed 15 more times in a year.



USE SEX TOYS OR LUBRICATION

"Lubrication is a good idea if you're dry vaginally," says Dr Pan. "Sex toys can be an enhancer or a detractor depending on the individual. It's a question of being open to these things. For women, having a relationship with themselves is important: vibrators can be useful to explore themselves sexually and their sexual existence, to rediscover what's important to them."

some people who don't think this [average amount] is a lot, but on the other hand, there are those who think that others are having more sex than them. Averages don't mean much overall," says Dr Pan. Dr Ellwood-Clayton agrees: "We live in a culture where sex is the new gold — the ultimate status symbol — and thereby none of us are having as much as we 'should'."

Want to, but can't?

"There may be physical reasons behind a lack of desire," says Dr Ronald McCoy, spokesperson for the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners. "There are two main types of problems with having sex. One is pain on intercourse, which affects around 70 per cent of women. The other is decreased libido, or inhibited orgasm, which affects around 25 per cent of women. In terms of pain on intercourse, it can be physical or psychological: it

may be that a woman has had a painful past experience, or if there's always been pain on sexual intercourse. If a woman has had normal sexual function in the past, then it's usually a physical cause." Whichever the case is, it's important you visit your doctor. "If there are no physical reasons for pain, then it's important for your GP to look at the emotional reasons behind their pain."

Take your partner to your GP for support and to help them understand your situation. "It's important to involve your partner throughout this whole process," says Dr McCoy. "The aim of any treatment is to help the woman be or feel in control of her body, so that she has the knowledge 'to own her vagina,'" he says.

External factors

"Medications can affect your libido, as well as alcohol and sedatives," says Dr McCoy. "The

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big one is antidepressants: one of the symptoms of depression is depressed libido." For many women who take antidepressants, their emotional mood may be lifted, but their libido is lower than ever. "So this may be mistaken for relationship issues," he says. "But actually, up to 75 per cent of women can feel less than sexual when on antidepressants. You can't underestimate the effect of antidepressants on a woman's libido," he says. "And some medications may also affect your ability to orgasm." Again, speak to your doctor for advice.

The contraceptive pill may also be a hindering factor. Italian scientists have confirmed that the

pill appears to affect a woman's sensitivity to smells. According to research, women's sense of smell is heightened just before menstruation. However, the contraceptive pill tampers with this cycle, so your smell receptors aren't as responsive to the male (or female) pheromone, and may reduce your interest in sex.

Whatever the reason, don't give up seeking support and solutions. "In a lot of situations, you need to spend a lot of time with the counselling and educating and support of the woman and her partner," says Dr McCoy. "There's a lot that can be done — and it needs to be taken seriously, just like any other health problem." ■