



Photo by Imagerymajestic

Did you know that 43 percent of women experience low libido at some point in their lives? This now includes women as young as 18 years old! This dramatic drop in libido can be directly tied to the technology advances in our lives, stress, anxiety and an increase in prescription medication and birth control. Women know this is happening but continue to portray their love lives as parallel to what is expected and portrayed in the media as a perfect relationship.

This has become such a problem that many women are scared to talk to their doctors and their friends about low libido and are seeking help on their own terms. With the season of love and Valentine's Day around the corner, we spoke to Kelli Young, a well-known sex therapist and author of "Revive your

Love Life," about what low sex drive is, how to identify the causes and how to turn around and improve your overall libido. Young is currently a lecturer at the University of Toronto and has a private practice in Toronto.

MG: What is low sex drive?

KY: Your sex drive or libido can be likened to an "appetite" for sexual activity, either alone or with a partner. The difficulty we have in quantifying sex drive, is that there isn't any consensus on what constitutes normal sex drive. Women vary greatly in their desire for sex. For some women, desiring sex once per week is perfectly acceptable, while others may desire it almost daily. What is important is your own subjective experience of the sex you are having, or not having. If both you and your partner are satisfied with your level of desire, then in all likelihood your sex drive would be considered normal and healthy. In medical terms, low sex drive – or hypoactive sexual desire disorder – is defined as a persistent or recurrent lack of sexual fantasies, thoughts, and/or interest in sexual activity that causes personal distress. So, if you are upset or worried about your libido, that's reason enough to take action.

MG: How common is low libido?

KY: Very! In fact, low libido is one of the most common complaints that I hear from women who come to see me in my sex therapy practice. More importantly, studies show that 40 to 50 percent of women experience low libido at some point in their lives, and this can be quite distressing for them and their partners.

MG: Why is low libido such a common problem for women?

KY: Sexual desire and sexual satisfaction are very much connected to one another, especially for women. Generally speaking, we are more likely to desire sex if it feels good; and many factors contribute to how sex "feels" for women. Women's sexual response is controlled by hormones, nerves, blood supply and stimulation, both physical stimulation (e.g. touch) and psychological stimulation (e.g. fantasy or imagery). Problems or deficiencies in any of these areas can negatively affect a woman's ability to become aroused and reach orgasm. Many physical and mental illnesses can negatively affect a woman's libido and her sexual response, as can the medications often used to treat these illnesses. Several types of commonly prescribed medications can have serious sexual side effects. Insufficient vaginal lubrication can be both a cause and a result of difficulties becoming sexually aroused. A lack of lubrication during sexual activity can lead to vaginal irritation or pain, and may even trigger vaginal or urinary tract infections. When sex is unfulfilling or painful, a woman is unlikely to desire it, and she may even begin to fear or avoid it

MG: Does a woman's sex drive fluctuate over time?

KY: Yes. Most women will notice natural and normal fluctuations in their libido or desire for sex throughout their lives. Some of the variables that influence these fluctuations include the hormonal changes associated with the menstrual cycle, pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, perimenopause, and menopause. Women of childbearing age may notice that they feel most "frisky" around mid-cycle during the time of ovulation. A woman's body goes through major hormonal shifts in the weeks just after delivering a baby and during the first few months of breastfeeding. During this time, women commonly experience a marked decrease in vaginal lubrication, and they may have breast tenderness, mood swings, and fatigue—all of which can dampen her sex drive. Estrogen levels naturally decline as women age and approach menopause, and many report symptoms of hot flashes, weight gain, sleeplessness, and decreases in vaginal lubrication and elasticity. Poor body image is a significant factor in low sex drive. A sedentary lifestyle, poor nutrition, inadequate sleep, and high levels of stress can also play a role in dampening sexual desire. The demands of juggling work, family and other responsibilities can be exhausting and overwhelming—there may be little energy and enthusiasm left for sex. Negative sexual beliefs and experiences can also impact a woman's enjoyment of, and desire for sex. Notably, relationship problems and difficulties in communication can have a major detrimental influence on a woman's libido



Sex Therapist Kelli Young

MG: How important is an active sex drive for a women's overall health?

KY: Much more important than most people realize! We all are familiar with the health benefits of eating a balanced diet and getting enough exercise, but little attention is paid to the health benefits of sex—and there are many! Here are 10 very good reasons why good sex is good for you. Good sex...

- ▶ Relieves stress
- ▶ Helps boost Immunity
- ▶ Burns Calories
- ▶ Improves heart health
- ▶ Increases self-image and self-esteem
- ▶ Improves couple intimacy
- ▶ Reduces pain
- ▶ Strengthens the pelvic floor muscles
- ▶ Helps you sleep better
- ▶ 10. May help you live longer!

Are you feeling a little skeptical about #10? Well, a highly publicized research study called "The Longevity Project" studied the lives of more than 1,500 men and women in order to answer the question of who lives longest and why. One of the most intriguing findings concerned the sexual relationships of the female subjects in the study. The study showed that those women with a higher frequency of achieving orgasm during sex lived longer than those with less satisfying sex lives!

MG: What can women do to improve their sex drive?

KY: There is quite a lot that women can do to take control of their sexuality and improve their libido. Often there are some relatively simple steps that women can take that will have a significant impact on their sex lives. Here are my top 10 steps (in no particular order) to boosting your libido:

STEP 1: TALK TO YOUR DOCTOR

Sometimes low libido may be connected to an underlying or undiagnosed medical condition. It is important to make sure you are getting appropriate care and/or treatment for any underlying illnesses or physiological causes of low libido. Additionally, some medications that are used to treat even very common medical conditions may have negative side effects that can dampen your sex drive. Let your doctor know about your sexual concerns and difficulties, and ask if there may be any sexual side effects associated with the particular medications you may be taking. Sometimes, an equally effective medication may be prescribed that can have fewer (or no) sexual side effects; or your doctor may be able to suggest a change in the dosage or the schedule of your current medication to improve your sexual desire and response. Make a list of any questions that you want to ask your doctor, and try to be as open and honest as you can in communicating your concerns. Your doctor may be able to order tests that can shed some light on the difficulties you are having, and make adjustments to your medical regime that can improve your libido.

STEP 2: CONSIDER A NATURAL LIBIDO SUPPLEMENT

Many women report experiencing significant improvements in sexual desire, response and satisfaction, as well as increased vaginal lubrication, while using a natural libido supplement such as FemMED Libido (<http://femmed.com/products/libido/>). Look for supplements containing a doctor-formulated combination of natural ingredients such as L-arginine, Tribulus, Terrestriis and Gingko Biloba. These ingredients have been demonstrated to help to encourage pelvic blood flow and lubrication, increase free testosterone and improve sexual desire.

STEP 3: GET TO KNOW YOUR BODY- INTIMATELY

Yes, that's right, I'm talking about the "M-word": Masturbation! I prefer to call it self pleasuring, and I prescribe it to almost all of my clients. Self-pleasuring is normal, healthy, and good for you and your libido. It can be an excellent way for you to develop a good understanding of the types of stimulation that you find arousing. Knowing what sensations you find most arousing and how to bring yourself to orgasm will enable you to show your partner how to touch you in a way that you find most pleasurable. And don't be shy about asking for what you really want—Believe it or not, most men like to be told what to do in bed.

STEP 4: USE A PERSONAL LUBRICANT

A wet vagina is usually a happy vagina! When a woman becomes aroused, her vagina will naturally create its own lubrication allowing for more comfortable and pleasurable penetration. However, hormonal shifts associated with the menstrual cycle, childbirth, breastfeeding, and menopause can significantly reduce the amount of lubrication we naturally produce. Lack of vaginal lubrication during sexual activity and intercourse can cause discomfort and irritation. Now, for those of you with comfortably-moist VGs, if you think lubricants aren't for you, think again! Even if you have adequate natural lubrication, the extra slipperiness offered by a lubricant can be highly arousing for women and their partners. Lubricants come in a wide selection of brands and varieties, so you are bound to find one that you love. Oil-based lubricants are wonderful for external body massage but are not ideal for use on or in the vagina, as they can be difficult to excrete (increasing the potential for infection), and can break down the latex in condoms, reducing the condom's protection against pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. For activities involving vaginal play and penetration, choose a water-based or silicone-based lubricant. Both are condom-friendly, and they can be applied anywhere on the body. Silicone lubricants stay slippery for longer, allowing for prolonged pleasuring; and silicone is hypoallergenic so individuals with sensitive skin often prefer these lubricants. Sexual lubricants can be found at your local pharmacy.

STEP 5: MAKE LIFESTYLE CHANGES

Here's another really good reason to get yourself off the couch: it might help to improve your libido! Moderate exercise and a healthy diet are vital to maintaining a good sex drive. High levels of stress can lower your testosterone, and testosterone is an essential hormone in controlling libido. Carve out "me time" to engage in pleasurable activities that help you to relieve stress. Make sure you are getting enough sleep—aim for at least seven hours per night. Maintain a good sleep-hygiene routine such as going to bed at the same time each night, and doing something relaxing before bed (having sex can certainly be a relaxing activity)! Smoking poses a host of health-related concerns, and it can also impede sexual arousal and response. The same is true for high levels of alcohol and caffeine. Work on reducing or eliminating smoking and keep your alcohol and caffeine intake at a low to moderate level. If you are committed to making some relatively simple changes in your lifestyle and routines, you may notice a corresponding increase in your sexual satisfaction and drive!

STEP 6: GIVE YOUR VAGINA A DAILY WORKOUT

Did you know that women with strong pelvic floor muscles have better orgasms? I kid you not! The pubococcygeus (PC) muscle is a hammock-like muscle that stretches from the pubic bone to the tailbone (coccyx), and it forms the pelvic floor that supports the vagina and pelvic organs. Pregnancy, childbirth, pelvic surgery, being overweight, and the normal affects of aging can result in a weakening of the PC muscle. The pelvic floor muscles are like any other muscles in the human body: if they don't get a regular "work out" they become weak and can eventually atrophy. Vaginal atrophy can be a common problem for menopausal women. So, this really is a "use it or lose it" phenomenon! Doing pelvic floor exercises, or "Kegel" exercises as they are commonly called, can aid in the prevention and treatment of pelvic organ prolapse. Additionally, maintaining strong pelvic floor muscles through Kegel exercises has been shown to increase sexual satisfaction and orgasmic pleasure. Kegel exercises are simple to do, and there are many online resources that can teach you the simple steps.

STEP 7: LEARN TO LOVE YOUR BODY

Do you measure your physical attractiveness against the supermodels in fashion magazines, and feel you pale by comparison? Many women compare themselves to an unattainably beauty ideal that is, quite frankly, fake (most of the images are touched up or changed dramatically) and unhealthy (a high proportion of fashion models meet diagnostic criteria for Anorexia Nervosa). In reality, women's bodies come in all shapes and sizes, and beauty truly is in the eye of the beholder. If every time you look in the mirror you tell yourself that you are too fat, too small-breasted, too *this*, or not enough of *that*, you are unlikely to feel particularly sexy. Negative feelings about yourself and your body can have a profound effect on your sexual self-esteem, desire, and satisfaction. Instead of consistently berating yourself with negative comments, try to be more gentle, forgiving and kind with yourself. Work towards embracing your body "as is". Wear clothes that fit—not clothes that you wish you could fit into. When you wear clothes that are too small, you will undoubtedly feel that you are too big. Pick colors, textures, and styles that flatter your figure and allow you to feel comfortable, confident and sexy.

STEP 8: ADDRESS RELATIONSHIP ISSUES

Although there is indeed something to be said for the occasional hot session of "make-up sex", ongoing conflicts can put a huge strain on your relationship and can drain your libido. A couple's communication and the overall quality of their relationship can have a significant impact on their sexual satisfaction. It is essential that couples work through conflicts and hurts. Carrying anger, resentment, and hurt feelings into the bedroom will inevitably lead to unsatisfying sex and further relationship dissatisfaction. There are a number of excellent self-help books that can assist couples in improving their communication. If you are having difficulty resolving emotional barriers and relationship issues on your own, seek the support of a trained professional.

STEP 9: PLAN AHEAD

Typically the women of this generation lead very full and busy lives. They have "to-do" lists longer than the average roll of toilet paper, and they are multi-tasking 24-7. So, expecting that sex should just happen spontaneously is unrealistic and often a set-up for disappointment. Prioritizing the importance of sex in your life and your relationship sometimes entails planning ahead, so that you can create a mood and environment that is conducive to intimacy. Make "dates" for intimacy. Think about what makes you feel most sexy, and do what you can to help get yourself in the mood—a sex'd up to-do list of sorts: a) Take a relaxing bath and use my most luxurious gel b) Use my favorite (hugs my body in just the right places f) Read a chapter of a steamy novel g)...you get the picture! Planning ahead allows you to transition from the regular and hectic daily grind to a more sensual and erotic mindset.

STEP 10: TRY A SEX TOY

Who said toys are just for kids? There is a wide variety of adult sex toys available that can really put the fun back into lovemaking and steam up the bedroom— or any room of the house for that matter! Vibrating sex toys provide a heightened level of stimulation that can be very arousing. Many women find that a vibrator can help them to reach high states of pleasure and orgasm more easily.

MG: When should a woman reach out for help?

KY: I have describes some steps that women can take on their own to improve their libido and sexual satisfaction. However, there are times when "taking control" means reaching out for help from your doctor and/or a therapist in physical or psychological—it is essential that you seek the support of a professional who can help to uncover the potential causes, and help you to overcome your pain. Having a history of sexual abuse or trauma can leave terrible emotional wounds, and contaminate one's perceptions about healthy sexuality. National research surveys in the United States document that 9-28 percent of women report having experienced some type of sexual abuse or assault in childhood. Overcoming the pain and intrusive memories of sexual abuse often requires the support of a trained and caring professional. Significant relationship struggles are another reason to seek support. Be sure to choose a therapist who has the skills and training to meet your particular needs. The American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) sets the highest training and credentialing standards and ensures that its registered clinical members adhere to a strict code of conduct. You can search for a therapist in your area on the "therapist locator" section of the AAMFT website (for US and Canadian residents): <http://www.aamft.org/>.

MG: Do you have any advice for women who may feel uncomfortable or embarrassed discussing this issue?

KY: If you are reading this article, your sexuality is obviously important to you, and so it should be! Recognizing that you have a right to enjoy sex and have satisfying sexual relationships is an important first step in learning to express your sexual needs and wishes. Many of us grew up believing that sex is "private" or a taboo subject, so openly airing your sexual woes can indeed be uncomfortable or embarrassing. However, talking about hemorrhoids, constipation, and menstrual concerns, can also be uncomfortable, but we intuitively recognize that we need to talk openly about these concerns if we are going to be able to get the help that we need. Remember that low sex drive is exceptionally common, so you will certainly be "among friends". On that note, trying reaching out to your other female friends about your sexual concerns...You will likely find that you are not alone in your struggles, and your friends might have some "tried and true" strategies that may also work for you.