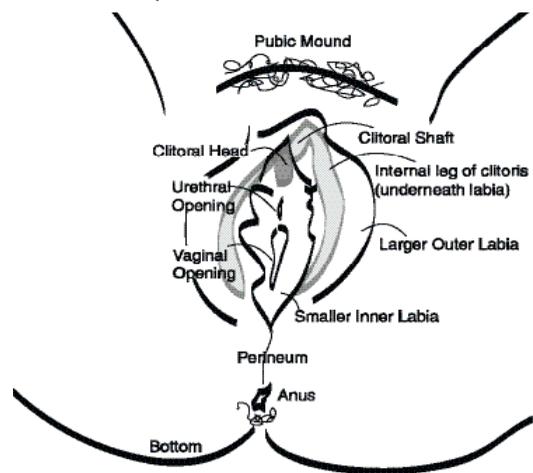


**Orgasms are different for everyone.** Some women can always bring themselves to orgasm when they choose, others can do so only sometimes, and some have never had an orgasm. Some women can have orgasms during sex play with a partner; others only have them when they are alone. The ability to have orgasms depends on healthy blood flow, healthy nerves, and strong, flexible pelvic floor muscles. The mind also plays a significant role. This brochure will help you understand how orgasm happens in the body and mind, and provide information about ways to experience your first orgasm, more frequent orgasms, or stronger orgasms.

## An Anatomy Refresher



Many of a woman's sexually responsive nerves are located in the lips surrounding the vagina (the labia), the first two inches of the vagina, and the clitoris. The clitoris is about four inches long, but you can only see a tiny bit of it—the tip or head located at the top of the vulva. From the tip, the clitoris extends back toward the pubic bone (this is the clitoral shaft), and then curves back under the labia to the vaginal opening (these are the clitoral legs, one on each side). The shape of the entire clitoris is like a wishbone.

## What Orgasm Is and How It Happens

An orgasm is a pleasurable peak experience brought on by stimulation, usually during sexual arousal. A person must be extremely aroused in order to reach orgasm, and without adequate arousal over a sufficient period of time, orgasm is not likely to happen.

During sexual arousal, our nerves send information to the brain about the sensations we experience. The brain, after interpreting the information as pleasurable, responds by sending messages that cause increased blood flow in different parts of the body. This increase in blood flow typically results in engorgement (swelling of the genitals), erection of the clitoris, flushed skin, and vaginal lubrication. With adequate stimulation and time (**it can take 20-45 minutes of direct clitoral stimulation**), a woman typically becomes aroused enough to have an orgasm.

When orgasm occurs, the brain sends the message for the pelvic floor muscles to rhythmically contract, which can last 10-15 seconds. This is a reflexive response, similar to a sneeze. For most, this is perceived as an intensely pleasurable experience. Eventually the brain says “done,” and all of the muscles in the body relax. Gradually, the physical signs of arousal subside, and feelings of well-being and whole-body relaxation set in. This is often referred to as the “afterglow.” Some orgasms feel huge, some feel small, and others somewhere in between. No two orgasms are exactly alike.

## Interest and Desire

The amount of time it takes a woman to reach orgasm is very individual and can change from day to day. Every woman is different, and what feels intensely pleasurable for one person may be too much or not enough stimulation for another. This can depend on a person's frame of mind, stress level, and stage of the menstrual cycle (or the presence of menopause). Medications, especially SSRI-type antidepressants like Prozac, can also affect orgasm, typically making more time or more intense stimulation necessary to reach a climax.

Some level of relaxation is necessary for arousal to happen. Concerns about work, kids or a partner, worries about body image, and religious, cultural and parental teachings all can play a role in inhibiting high levels of arousal. An orgasm is unlikely to happen if you're “just not that into it,” if you find it difficult to communicate how and where you like to be touched, or if you experience any unwanted pain during sex play. Even worrying about having an orgasm can make it much less likely to happen! By design, the body and mind give priority to the kinds of thoughts that *prevent* us from focusing on arousal—it's the same fight or flight response that keeps

us aware of our surroundings in case of a threat. **For more on interest and desire, see our Libido brochure.**

The period of high arousal just before orgasm is sometimes referred to as the “Plateau Phase,” and it may be short, long, or mid-length. Some women experience frustration during the Plateau Phase, believing they are taking too long to have an orgasm, or feeling like something “isn't working.” Each woman experiences different lengths of time on the plateau, and any length of time is completely normal. The plateau is often a very pleasurable place to be, even if you do not have an orgasm. In fact, many women find this period of high arousal to be the most pleasurable part of sex play.

## The Role of Self-Pleasure

Masturbation is one of the most effective ways to determine what types of stimulation are most pleasurable for you, and how much intensity you prefer. It's a great way to get to know yourself and your body, allowing you to experience pleasure without the pressure of anyone else's expectations. Many women find self-pleasuring a good place to start if they have never experienced an orgasm and would like to.

You can share what you learn about your body from self-pleasuring with a partner, including what types of stimulation are most pleasurable to you. Communicating in this way can help you build and increase arousal during partner sex, while taking an active role in defining your pleasure and preferences. **For more techniques to explore during self-pleasuring, see our Masturbation for Women brochure.**

## Tips for Becoming (More) Orgasmic

There are a variety of reasons why women's orgasms may change, become less frequent, or disappear altogether over time. If you've never had an orgasm, or you're not as orgasmic as you want to be, consider these questions:

***Is your inability to orgasm a problem for you, your partner, both, or neither?***

If you enjoy sex the way it is and you don't feel the need to make any changes, that's absolutely fine—there is much pleasure available to you outside of the

experience of orgasm. If you orgasm infrequently (or don't experience orgasm at all) and are comfortable experiencing pleasure in other ways, communicate that to your partner(s). It's important to let them know that this is not about their skills as lovers, and that you feel just fine the way you are. Often, partners worry that they are not doing something right, and that you are not enjoying the sexual contact. It can be helpful to reassure your partner and communicate about what kinds of touch you enjoy.

If you feel that your inability to have an orgasm with a partner is affecting other parts of your relationship, or that relationship difficulties are affecting your ability to have orgasms, consider finding a sex counselor or therapist to help you work through what you both are experiencing and feeling.

If you are frustrated that your orgasms have changed and you would like to improve your orgasmic ability, this next section is for you.

***Have you had orgasms in the past and find that you have more difficulty now?***

Has something changed in your life? The changes might be physical or age-related, induced by work or stress, caused by a shift in your relationship or a new medication. Change is not a bad thing, but it may require you to explore new types of stimulation, and to discover new paths to arousal and orgasm. Remember, the amount of stimulation each of us needs to reach orgasm can vary for many reasons. It is normal for the amount of time and type of stimulation required for orgasm to change throughout the course of a person's lifetime.

***Do you find that the muscle contractions and sensations of orgasm do not feel as intense as they used to?***

Learning to tone your pelvic floor muscles—the muscles that contract during orgasm—can help make orgasms feel stronger. Consider learning to do effective Kegel exercises by contracting and relaxing the pelvic floor muscles. Consciously relaxing the pelvic floor muscles is just as important as strengthening them, because it helps the muscles stay flexible. **For more on strengthening the pelvic floor, see our Pelvic Floor Health for Women brochure.**

If you find that it takes you longer than before to reach orgasm, experiment with increasing the amount of arousal time you allow yourself, either alone or with a partner. Try stimulating your mind and the rest of your body before sex play: Read or listen to an erotic story. Watch an erotic movie. Play with different kinds of touch, trying new techniques to see which ones work for you. Try using a vibrator or other sexual enhancement tools to see if that increases stimulation and decreases the time it takes for you to be aroused to orgasm. Incorporate all of your senses, and see what it feels like to stimulate other parts of your body besides your genitals (nipples, ears, toes, back of your neck).

#### **Have you rarely or never had orgasms?**

5-10% of women have never had an orgasm, but almost all women are physically able to do so. Medications, circulatory problems, metabolic disorders, scar tissue or nerve damage from surgery can all strongly influence your ability to reach orgasm. Consult a health care provider if you think an existing health condition or medication may be a contributing factor.

Most women are not able to reach orgasm through vaginal penetration alone—**fewer than 30% of women have orgasms during penetrative vaginal intercourse without additional, direct stimulation to the clitoris by a hand or a vibrator.** The anatomy just isn't right for adequate stimulation of the clitoris during vaginal penetration. Incorporating positions and techniques that allow you or a partner to provide clitoral stimulation can make orgasm more likely.

If your clitoris doesn't feel as sensitive as you would like it to be, and you've tried using a variety of vibrators with no success, you might want to try using a suction device (we carry a simple one, called the *Nipple or Clit Pump*) on your clitoris once you are aroused. This increases the blood flow to your clitoris, making it more engorged and therefore more sensitive. A higher-intensity vibrator such as the *Hitachi Magic Wand* can also help increase stimulation for those experiencing decreased clitoral sensitivity or nerve-related issues. Some women can experience numbness due to too much focused stimulation on the clitoris itself. If this happens to you, try stimulating the areas around

the head and legs of the clitoris (see the anatomy diagram for more info). You can also try stimulating other areas of your body and vulva for a period of time before returning to direct clitoral stimulation.

As you incorporate new tools and techniques, **try not to be goal-oriented**—removing the pressure to have an orgasm often makes it easier to have one. Don't worry if arousal builds and subsides as you experiment—that's normal. Think of it as some healthy research on the sensations you like best.

#### **More, Better Orgasms**

Many people find that they have longer orgasms when they incorporate a wide variety of stimulation to all of the parts of their bodies that enjoy touch. Stroking and caressing many different nerve endings will intensify your arousal and pleasure. In addition, the longer you pleasure your whole body, the more intense your orgasms are likely to be. This means exploring all those places that feel wonderful when you or your partner strokes, licks, or rubs them.

You may choose to experiment with “peaking,” or stimulating yourself almost to the pleasurable peak of orgasm, and then removing or decreasing the intensity of stimulation to delay orgasm. This allows you to extend the time in which you are experiencing higher levels of arousal, and can result in a more intense-feeling orgasm. Also, the more often you have orgasms, the more intense your orgasms will likely be. Although it may take longer to have orgasms when you have them frequently, many women and men report stronger, more satisfying orgasms when they do so.

Your “homework” is to learn more about your body, your orgasms, and how and where you most enjoy being touched. Explore what happens when you hold off from having an orgasm for as long as you can. Then you can teach this to your partner—take him or her on a sensual tour of your body, then ask your partner to take you on a tour of his or hers in exchange. Orgasms can be a delightful part of pleasurable and satisfying sexual expression for many people. With some information, exploration, and a spirit of adventure, you are more likely to experience orgasms and pleasure in all the ways you wish.

#### **Suggested Resources**

If you'd like some **books** to help you in your journey,:

*The Elusive Orgasm* by Vivienne Cass, PhD

An excellent book if you've never had an orgasm, or if you used to have more or stronger orgasms. Covers a variety of orgasm difficulties in an individualized format, with exercises and suggestions. Very inclusive.

*For Yourself* by Lonnie Barbach

An excellent step-by-step program for women who want a set of exercises to follow on the path to greater sexual fulfillment. Focuses primarily on learning to enjoy sex for your sake, not to satisfy a partner.

*I Heart Female Orgasm* by Dorian Solot and Marshall Miller

A friendly book all about the female orgasm. A must-have for those who want to learn more about female pleasure, how to have it and how to give it. Inclusive of all readers, including those who are (or whose partner is) transgendered or intersex.

*The Multi-Orgasmic Woman* by Mantak Chia & Dr. Rachel Carlton Abrams

Emphasizes good health (both overall and sexual) as a way to increase orgasmic capacity. With a Taoist approach, it includes exercises designed to optimize sexual energy. Not ideal for preorgasmic women, but a good choice for those who can have orgasms and want to try having multiple orgasms, or expanded orgasmic sensations.

For **DVDs** on orgasms, featuring self-pleasuring:

*Celebrating Orgasm*—Betty Dodson helps five women have their first and better orgasms.

*Orgasmic Women*, by Betty Dodson—women of various shapes, sizes, ages and ethnicities discuss how they masturbate, then demonstrate their favorite techniques.

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# Orgasms for women

~What they are &  
how they happen

~How to have them  
more often

~How to make them stronger

~Things to try when  
you aren't having them



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