

'Not tonight, HONEY'

Do you find that you're not in the mood lately when it comes to sex?
Or is your partner the one lacking interest?

by ROSHAAN BOUWER

Your once healthy and active sex life seems to be fizzling out and things in the bedroom are pretty lacklustre.

Either your or your partner's sex drive has taken a dip. We chatted to Dr Marelize Swart, a Cape Town-based psychologist and sex therapist, about what causes a low sex drive, the impact it can have, and how we can manage the issue.

An individual's sex drive or the desire to engage in sexual activity is referred to as 'libido'. A low libido can be as a result of many different things, ranging from medical issues to stress and problems within a relationship. Both men and women can experience a low libido, and this is normal from time to time with levels varying at the different stages of life. It is also not uncommon for you and your partner's interest to not match all the time, but when it carries on for an extended period, it can become a concern and cause problems between the couple.

WHO IS MOST AFFECTED?

Studies across the globe revealed a higher percentage of women report having difficulties with low sexual desire at some point in their lives as compared to men, influenced by biological, psychological and social factors.

HOW TO DEAL WITH LOW LIBIDO

DR SWART RECOMMENDS:

- 1 See your physician to rule out any possible medical causes, or if sex is painful.
- 2 See a therapist with sexual expertise for sex education and/or help with relationship issues to get unstuck.
- 3 Make some lifestyle changes: do some exercise, try to manage your stress better, communicate with your partner, set aside time for each other (schedule a date night), add a little spice to your love life (try something different and get an accessory, such as a sex toy).

Dr Swart concurs with this finding. 'I am seeing both male and female patients who struggle with low desire issues, however, I see more women. This does not surprise me as women also have much less testosterone than males, and testosterone is the "desire hormone". Also, the brain is a woman's largest sex organ so the conditions or context for sexual activity is very important,' she says.

WHAT IS THE MAIN CAUSE IN WOMEN?

❖ BIOLOGICAL FACTORS

During pregnancy, after giving birth and while breastfeeding, women experience changes in their hormone levels, and this may alter their desire for sex. After giving birth, oestrogen levels decrease, which can lead to low libido, vaginal dryness and difficulty in becoming aroused. The male hormone testosterone is needed by women for normal sexual function and during breastfeeding, prolactin is produced, which suppresses testosterone, meaning that this too could result in a low libido.

Chronic illnesses can also affect the sex drive, including high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease and thyroid issues. Some prescribed medications,

such as antidepressants, can also have a negative effect on the libido. Women who experience pain during intercourse or who cannot reach orgasm are also most likely to have a reduced interest in sex.

❖ PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

We may not realise it but our state of mind plays an important role when it comes to our sexual desire. If not in a good mind frame, many people's interest in sexual activity will wane while their attention is focused elsewhere. Issues that can affect libido are anxiety or depression, stress, poor body image and low self-esteem as well as past negative sexual experiences.

The top reasons for low libido

- 1 Low self-esteem
- 2 Stress
- 3 Depression
- 4 Health conditions
- 5 Alcohol or drug use
- 6 Lack of sleep
- 7 Erectile dysfunction
- 8 Hormone imbalance
- 9 Medication
- 10 Menopause
- 11 Lack of time
- 12 Relationship trouble

❖ SOCIAL FACTORS

For many women, having an emotional closeness with their partner is important and essential for sexual intimacy. So, if you and your partner are experiencing ongoing problems, this discord is going to negatively impact your sex drive.

❖ WHAT CHALLENGES CAN ARISE?

As having sex and being intimate is an important part of a relationship, when one partner has a low libido, it can have negative effects. This desire discrepancy can lead to a lack of intimacy, one partner is left feeling rejected and undesirable, and even worse – a sexless marriage. According to Dr Swart: 'If the discrepancy in the couple's libido has a distressing effect on the couple, then it is bound to really cause huge relational discord. It often becomes "the white elephant" in the room. When there are no sexual issues, sex can be 10% of a happy relationship, however, once it becomes a problem, it can become 90% of an unhappy one. Couples often become stuck and are unable to fix this issue among themselves.'

❖ IN THE BEDROOM...

Dr Swart says that it is vital for couples to know that when it comes to women's sexual desire, most women in a long-term relationship experience responsive desire as opposed to spontaneous desire. 'This means that the majority of women might not feel desirous that often and they might first need a half an hour or so of leisurely outercourse to reach an aroused state before their desire to be sexual might kick in. And that is perfectly normal. It is like exercise. You might not be in the mood, but after 10 minutes your endorphins kick in and you really start to enjoy it.'

When it comes to intercourse, Dr Swart shares that women's main complaint about the male lovemaking style is that it is too rushed, too mechanical, and too narrowly focused on the breasts and genitals. 'Almost every major sex survey agrees that most women prefer a shift away from genital or breasts preoccupation toward slow,



HELPFUL RESOURCES

Southern African Sexual Health Association (SASHA): sasha.org.za

International Society for the Study of Women's Sexual Health: isswsh.org

10 natural ways to boost libido

- 1 Eat a nutritious diet
- 2 Manage anxiety
- 3 Try herbal remedies
- 4 Focus on 'othercourse'
- 5 Get good-quality sleep
- 6 Try sex therapy
- 7 Get regular exercise
- 8 Maintain a healthy weight
- 9 Quit smoking
- 10 Improve relationship quality

playful, whole-body massage – with or without an orgasm.'

Dr Swart adds that many women start to resent men for rushing through sex as women consider their entire body

as one big erogenous zone. 'In fact, whole-body, massage-inspired caressing is the key to high-quality lovemaking. Yes, genital and breast appreciation is part of great sex, but so too are foot massages, back rubs, scalp, face and back-of-the-knee caresses, and kisses on the earlobes, shoulders and neck. Men should slow down, forget genital and breast preoccupation, and learn to appreciate leisurely, playful, whole-body sensuality.'

Rather than the linear model of foreplay-and-then-the-intercourse, great sex is more circular, says Dr Swart. 'It moves from one form of mutual touch to another, and might not end with an orgasm. So forget "foreplay", and think of lovemaking as "othercourse" (with or without an orgasm or penetrative sex) and treat yourself and your partner to whole-body love play. It is more fun, more erotic, and ultimately more fulfilling.'