



DISORDERS OF SEXUAL FUNCTION IN FEMALES

Information for Patients and Families

Covenant Health

Mental Health Programs

Grey Nuns Community Hospital & Misericordia Community Hospital

The Human Sexual Response Cycle

Before describing the various disorders of sexual functioning, some information about the human sexual response cycle needs to be provided.

This involves four distinct phases:

- **The desire phase** which includes interest in sexual activity and spontaneous sexual feelings.
- **The arousal phase** occurs after there is sexual interest and involves the reaction of the body. This includes increased heart rate, increased breathing, sweating, flushing and, in the female, swelling of the genital area including the clitoris as well as the surrounding area. This is often referred to as the 'orgasmic' plateau. Of interest, females have as much, if not more, erectile tissue than males. In the male the erectile tissue is concentrated in the penis, whereas in the female this includes the clitoris as well as the surrounding tissue. Because of the increased blood flow to the area, there is also secretion or lubrication which occurs in the vagina. Other parts of the body may also swell and become aroused.
- **The orgasmic phase** is the actual orgasm and is difficult to describe. For females it is an intense pleasurable sensation that is felt in the genital area, particularly in the muscles that surround the vagina, but is also experienced as a warm and tingling sensation that spreads throughout the body.
- **The resolution phase** is the time interval before a female can become aroused to the point of orgasm again. For some females this period is very short and allows multiple orgasms.

Each of the phases of the sexual response cycle is distinct with respect to the neurotransmitters (chemical messengers) that are involved as well as the part of the nervous system that is involved. Dysfunction can occur in any of the phases of the sexual response cycle leading to specific sexual disorders:

- A lack of sexual interest or desire
- A psychiatric or medical condition
- Severe anxiety about performing sexually
- It can be caused by a neurological problem, such as complications of Diabetes or Multiple Sclerosis
- It may be due to testosterone deficiency
- It may be a side effect of medications, such as antidepressants.

Female Orgasmic Disorder

Inorgasmia is the condition in which a female is unable to achieve an orgasm or is able to do so only a long period of time regardless of adequate sexual interest and excitement. It occurs in about 24% of females and can be caused by:

- Lack of arousal
- Pain during intercourse
- Some medical conditions
- Some medications, such as antidepressants

Sexual Pain Disorder

1. Dyspareunia can be caused by any local problem involving the vagina, such as an infection, a cyst of the Bartholin's glands, Herpes lesions, prolapse of the uterus, etc.
2. Vaginismus is a reflex action causing muscles around the vagina to contract whenever sexual penetration is attempted. If intercourse continues to be attempted this can result in severe pain. There can be various degrees of

severity of vaginismus. It can be caused by any traumatic sexual event in which physical and or psychological pain was experienced. As a result of this experience the muscles surrounding the vagina contract as a reflex to prevent this from happening again

Are There Treatments Available for the Sexual Disorders?

The answer is yes. To begin with, it is important to talk to your family doctor about the problem you are experiencing. Your doctor will need to know if the problem occurs every time sexual activity is attempted, or periodically. Is the problem recent, or has it been life long? What part of the sexual response cycle is affected, and does the problem occur with every partner (if there is more than one)? Does the problem occur during masturbation? Is there a psychiatric or medical illness present and, if so, are medications involved? Depending on the problem, a referral may be made to a specialist, such as a Neurologist or a Psychiatrist who specializes in these disorders.

Specific Treatment

There are various specific treatment options available. Some treatments are physical in nature such as Kegel exercises (pubococcygeal muscle exercises).

Some treatments involve change or addition of medications.

Other therapies may be psychological in nature and can be individual or in couples. Many people have good success with this type of treatment.

Getting Help:

The best place to start is to discuss your problem with your family doctor who will either provide treatment or a referral to a specialist.. If the family doctor is unable to provide help he or she in this area. The type of specialist may depend on the nature of your problem and could include a gynecologist, urologist, neurologist psychiatrist, psychologist or social worker. It is very important to realize that help is available and to overcome any embarrassment that may exist so that treatment can take place.

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