



Sex Drive: How Do Men and Women Compare?

Experts discuss the differences between male sex drive and female sex drive.

By Susan Seliger

WebMD Feature

Reviewed by Cynthia Dennison Haines, MD

The simplest way to capture the differences between men's and women's sex drives is to consider how you'd answer this test: create a sentence using the words "sex" and "love."

If you're a woman, odds are your sentence goes something like this: "When two people understand each other, trust each other, and love each other, then the sex is the best." If you're a man, chances are your sentence more closely resembles this: "I love sex."

It's a stereotype, it's a cliché, and more often than not, it's true. "We like to think of men having the higher sex drive -- it's not always true, but more often, it is," says Eva Ritvo, MD, vice chairman in the department of psychiatry and behavioral science at the Miller School of Medicine, University of Miami.

"Each person's sex drive is like an appetite: Some people spend their whole life in the kitchen and think about food all the time; some people can skip lunch," says Ritvo, who is also chair of the department of psychiatry and behavioral medicine at Mount Sinai Medical Center, Florida.

As a rule, men don't like to skip lunch. But that's only the beginning of the story.

What Is Sex Drive?

Sex drive -- the way men and women think about sex and engage in sex -- is a slippery concept. Researchers have a hard time quantifying it: Is it how often we think about sex? How often we want sex? How often we become aroused or actually have sex? Sex drive is all that, and more.

"Sex drive, which scientists now call sexual desire, is one of the most difficult to define," says Patricia Koch, PhD, associate professor of Biobehavioral Health & Women's Studies at Pennsylvania State University and adjunct professor of human sexuality at Widener University. Sexual arousal is easily identifiable -- for men it shows up as an erection, in women, lubrication (and enlargement of the clitoris).

"But desire is not just about arousal or frequency -- how often you have sex can depend on so many other circumstances and opportunities: whether you have a partner or not, whether you like your partner," says Koch.

Some researchers have begun to question how we define sex drive -- insisting that we have only looked at it from a male model, so of course women come up short. The male sex drive model resembles a straight line: It is a "linear model of sexual response, where first they have desire, then arousal, then orgasm," says Koch. For women, sexual interest follows a more meandering model. "Their drive is for emotional bonding and caring -- once they feel that, then they get aroused and interested," Koch says. "Women want and enjoy a lot more sex play than men want. It takes them longer to be stimulated through sex play than men," says Koch. What's more pleasurable to women may be affectionate physical contact that may or may not end in orgasm, and this indirectness is not a sign of a lack of sex drive.

Here are a few things researchers do know about how men and women's sex drives compare. Bear in mind, individuals vary from these norms. That's what makes life -- and sex -- so interesting.

It Is Common for Couples to Experience a Discrepancy in Sex Drives

"The biggest problem I encounter in sex and marital counseling is an imbalance in sexual interest -- one partner wants more, one wants less," says Richard Driscoll, PhD, a marriage therapist in Knoxville, Tenn. for 34 years, and author of *Intimate Masquerades: A Survival Guide for Those Who Know Too Much*. "The average American married five years has sex once or twice a week. That's your average. It's not a problem if you vary from that average -- you only have a problem when you cannot agree," says Driscoll.

Many couples cannot agree. Driscoll says half of all marriages experience some discrepancy in desire at some point, and it's usually men who have a higher sex drive. About one in five women report that their husbands have turned them down for sex, Driscoll says, while half of all men say their wives have turned them down.

Sex and Happiness Are Strongly Linked

"For men, we know one thing: The absence of sex makes them unhappy. For women, it is not as problematic," says Edward Laumann, a professor of sociology at the University of Chicago and lead author of *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States*, the most comprehensive survey of sexual practices since the Kinsey Report.

We also know that in nationwide studies, men report that they are happier and more satisfied with their sex lives than women. "In our study of people aged 40 to 80, there was a 10- to 14-point spread between men and women reporting they were 'extremely or very satisfied.' Women were lower in satisfaction -- across the world," says Laumann, citing data from a 2006 international study published in the *Archives of Sexual Behavior*.

Good Sex and Good Health Go Together

A fulfilling sex life leads to happiness, which in turn seems to make you healthier generally. "All our studies verify this: The more satisfied you are in sexual matters, the happier you are in general," says Laumann. And the likelier you are to be healthy, too. "We have also found that the happy couple is more likely to be compliant with medication when physical problems come up -- so your health is likely to be better. Married people are healthier than single people," Laumann says.

Men Think About Sex More Than Women

"When sociologists ask 'How often do you think about sex?' the responses show pretty dramatic differences between men and women," says Laumann. "The majority of males between 18-to-59 of the U.S. population report that they think about sex at least once a day -- one third think of it several times a day. Only 25% of females report thinking about it every day," Laumann says.

But maybe some of that difference in sex drive may simply result from the fact that what turns women on is quite different -- and less explicitly sexual -- than what turns men on. "I have had women say 'What turns me on is when my husband cleans up after dinner and takes out the garbage -- then my interest for sex is piqued,'" says Koch.

Biology Works to Keep Women's Sex Drive in Check

There are strong biological as well as cultural reasons why women may not be as free to pursue sex as men, even in our post-birth control, post-feminist world. In the simplest terms, women may be hard-wired to be cautious about sex because they are the ones who can get pregnant and wind up taking care of the baby.

"Pregnancy is a threatening condition for women -- it renders them vulnerable; they can't run from predators," explains Laumann. As a woman, "If you don't pick your time felicitously, you get selected out of the gene pool," Laumann says.

Males, at least young males, seem more avidly interested in sex in nearly every species in the animal kingdom, because they have everything to gain -- disseminating their genetic material -- and not much to lose, according to Richard Driscoll.

"You've seen dogs line up for the female in heat and cats go out in storms to tomcat around," says Driscoll, explaining that because the males of most species invest less in offspring, they're free to pursue opportunities for sex. The female, who will be required to invest more, does well to "go slowly and choose carefully, because she is going to have to put a lot of resources into each offspring."

The only exceptions to this rule -- when the female, not the male, becomes the sexual pursuer -- are species such as sea horses and sea snipes (a bird) in which the males are the caretakers of the young, according to Driscoll. "In those two species, the females come on to the males, because the males are investing more" in the offspring, Driscoll says.

Taking Care of Others Can Dampen Sex Drive

"One of the most intriguing obstacles to desire is caretaking," says Esther Perel, a couples and family therapist in New York City, and author of *Mating In Captivity: Reconciling the Erotic and the Domestic*. Women today are largely the caretakers -- of the children, the husband, and the home, even if they, too, work outside the home.

Why does this sabotage sex drive? Caretaking makes you think about others, while desire hinges on your being able to think about yourself and your own needs. "Desire is rooted in autonomy, freedom, and selfishness. If you can't be selfish, you can't have an orgasm," Perel says.

Medical Conditions and Medications Can Affect Sex Drive

Any serious illness, from alcoholism to cancer and diabetes can be distracting and dampen ardor. Depression, as well as the SSRIs used to treat it, can inhibit desire. So can tranquilizers and blood pressure medications. Some women find the hormonal changes of menopause cause a drop in sex drive. Cardiovascular disease and hypertension can reduce blood flow to the body, including the genitals, and decrease sexual interest as well. Conditions such as endometriosis, fibroids, thyroid disorders, and tumors of the pituitary gland (which controls most hormone production, including sex hormones), can also have an impact on sexual drive.

Our Culture Encourages Men's Sex Drive, Not Women's

Socialization in our culture plays a role, too, in the disparity between men's and women's sex drive. "Men are encouraged to pursue sex more than women; they are taught the more you have the better; you're more of a man if you do," says Lonnie Barbach, PhD, a psychologist and sex therapist on the clinical faculty of the University of California, San Francisco, and author of *For Yourself, For Each Other: Sharing Sexual Intimacy*.

The double standard on acceptable sexual behavior for men and women, which still prevails, affects women's sexual desire, Koch says. "I work with college women, and even though we have *Sex and the City* on TV saying you can be sexual, women still get the message that it is not OK. Men are looked at as studs if they are sexual, but the women are still called sluts," Koch says.

Men's and Women's Sex Drives Work Differently

Men and women travel slightly different paths to arrive at sexual desire. "I hear women say in my office that desire originates much more between the ears than between the legs," says Perel. "For women there is a need for a plot -- hence the romance novel. It is more about the anticipation, how you get there -- it is the longing that is the fuel for desire," Perel says.

Men, on the other hand, don't need to have nearly as much imagination, Perel says, since sex is simpler and more straightforward for them.

That does not mean that men do not seek intimacy, love and connection in a relationship --- they do, just as women do. They just view the role sex plays in that relationship differently. "Women want to talk first, connect first, then have sex," Perel explains. "For men, sex is the connection. Sex is the language men use to express their tender loving vulnerable side," Perel says. "It is their language of intimacy."

Men and Women Approach Casual Sex Differently

Willingness to engage in casual sex "splits totally along gender lines," says Driscoll. In a University of Hawaii study, researchers had a good-looking guy and good-looking girl approach a student of the opposite sex and talk for five minutes.

After five minutes, each student was asked one of two questions: When asked to go out on a date, male and female responses were identical: 50% of women and 50% of men said yes. But when asked to have sex, the answers couldn't have been more opposite: 75% of the men said yes and 0% of the women said yes, according to Driscoll.

Orgasms Are Different for Men and Women

While researchers find it tricky to try to quantify issues like the differing quality of male versus female orgasms, they do have data on how long it takes men and women to get there. Men, on average, take four minutes from the point of entry until ejaculation, according to Laumann. (Well, that's three minutes and 58 seconds longer than the average mosquito.) Women usually take around 10 to 11 minutes to reach orgasm. If they do.

That's another difference between the sexes -- how often they have an orgasm during sex. Among men who are part of a couple, 75% report that they always have an orgasm, as opposed to 26 % of the women. And not only is there a difference in reality, there's one in perception, too. While the men's female partners reported their rate of orgasm accurately, the women's male partners reported that they believed their female partners had orgasms 45% of the time.

The Number of Sex Partners -- And Affairs -- Varies by Gender, Too

For men, the median number of partners they report is six, according to Laumann's research. The median number of partners women report is two. Some 23% of men report having 5-to-10 partners; 20% of women report that many.

"Extramarital relations are less prevalent than pop and pseudo-scientific accounts contend," according to Tom Smith in the 2006 National Opinion Research Center report, *American Sexual Behavior: Trends, Socio-Demographic Differences, and Risk Behavior*.

"The best estimates are that about 3% to 4% of currently married people have a sexual partner besides their spouse in a given year and about 15%-18% of ever-married people have had a sexual partner other than their spouse while married." However, Smith writes, married men are twice as likely to have affairs as married women.

What Can Couples Do to Get Their Sex Drives in Sync?

It is only normal for sex drive to ebb and flow, and couples should not be overly alarmed to find that their sex drives do not always match up. However, if differing levels of desire is causing consistent unhappiness for one or both partners, it is important to resolve it. "You both have to be happy with your level of sexual activity," says Barbach.

1. Talk it over in a calm, neutral setting.

Start talking -- but not right after one person has just been turned down in his or her romantic advances. Wait for a neutral time and do it in a non-charged setting -- outside the bedroom. If opening the conversation feels awkward, get a book about sex and read it together. Look at the pictures, laugh -- break the tension. Let your partner know that you're open to making things better between you. That's half the battle.

2. Avoid name-calling.

He is not a “sex fiend” just because he wants more, and she is not a “nymphomaniac” if she wants more, or “frigid” when she wants less. If you are in a committed relationship, and you want it to work, you both have to recognize that it is perfectly normal for sex drives to differ. The important thing is for you both to enjoy the sex you have together -- however and whenever you do.

3. Both parties have to give a little.

Therapists seem divided about who has to try to adapt his or her sex drive to the other’s. “Whoever wants more sex is the one who has to make the most adjustments,” insists Driscoll. Other therapists say the opposite: “The general rule of thumb in sex therapy is that the person with the least desire has to figure out how to enjoy it more -- have more sex, come to a negotiation,” says Pepper Schwartz, PhD, a professor of sociology at the University of Washington and past president of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality. Clearly, the best thing to do is meet in the middle.

4. Allow for physical affection that does not lead to sex.

Go out of your way to touch each other in affectionate, but not explicitly sexual ways. Do not let a day go by when you do not say hello or goodbye with a kiss. Touch each other playfully as you pass in the hall. Cuddle with the clearly-stated agreement that this will not lead to sex so as to take the pressure off the less libidinous partner. Hug until you feel relaxed. These tokens of affection will build the bond between you -- and the electricity as well.

5. Schedule sex dates.

Knowing that on a designated day, you will be having sex, will bring relief to both parties. No one has to face the humiliation of being rejected, or the anguish and guilt of disappointing their partner.

Yes, you have to give up the notion that sex is only hot when it’s spontaneous. But a sure thing can be just as satisfying. And the process of planning can build anticipation. Take pleasure in the details, from the mood music to the lingerie, and make sure there will be no interruptions for at least two hours.

6. Court your partner -- presents help.

“Men have to court women with gifts and good manners to get them in the mood -- every animal in every species does it,” says Driscoll. Among chimpanzees, he says, “the male gives the largest share of the kill to a fertile female” so he can be assured of sex.

Though perhaps found less in nature, men like presents, too. Both partners need to remember how solicitous they were of each other when they first met and always strive for that kind of respect and generosity of spirit.

7. Try whole-body stimulation -- and take it slow.

For men, sexuality tends to be focused disproportionately on the genitals. Slowing lovemaking down and focusing on the other erogenous zones can give a woman the time she needs to become aroused and receptive, and can help ease performance pressures for men. Be pleasure oriented not goal oriented.

8. Surprise fuels sex drive.

Be imaginative and playful. Change rooms, try the couch. Take a look at some of the newer erotic literature and films that include female fantasies as well as male. Share your fantasies with each other -- acting them out only if both of you are comfortable with the scenario. A fantasy doesn’t have to be anything more than imagining what you wish someone would do to give you pleasure. Start small ... and build.

9. Reduce Stress in Your Lives

Stress can be the ultimate sex drivesapper. Help each other play more and work less -- go for hikes, take long weekends away. Even if things are going badly at work or with the kids, try to separate those issues from what

is going on between you as a couple. "Desire is a healthy form of entitlement -- when you don't feel deserving, you shut down," Perel says. And once you've helped each other relax a little, remember sex itself can be an excellent stress-reliever.

10. Get outside help

People go to golf and tennis clinics -- so why not sex therapy to improve your game in the bedroom? Also consult a doctor to see if there may be a medical reason behind your dissatisfaction with your sex drive. There may be alternative drugs for depression and other conditions that can have less of an impact on sex drive. And just as poor health inhibits male and female sex drive, good health resulting from increased exercise and improved diet can help restore libido.

Published February 2007.

This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. The information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional.