



Sex: Who wants it?

As an obstetrician gynecologist, one of the most common complaints I hear is, "I couldn't care less about sex. If my husband didn't want it I wouldn't bother!" Studies show that about **one third** of women in the US admit to lacking interest in sex. Surprisingly, this is true at all ages, from 18 to 59.

If 33 million women feel that way, it must be ok, right? When is it not ok? Decreased sexual desire or decreased libido is only a problem when it makes you unhappy, or if it jeopardizes a relationship that is important to you.

Decreased libido is called 'primary' if a person has never had any interest in sex. It is 'secondary' in a person who previously had these feelings but no longer or rarely does.

Human sexuality is complicated. Many factors contribute to decreased interest in sex. Many of the factors are under our control. Some are not. Sometimes decreased interest in sex is entirely appropriate.

Life Stage Factors

In adolescence, early adulthood, dating and new marriage, sex is new, often forbidden. Partners are new. Lives are uncluttered. Responsibilities are few. The primary hormone of desire, **testosterone** (yes, even in women), is at its peak. Sexual desire is at its peak.

Pregnancy/childbirth – sexual interest diminishes over the course of pregnancy and gradually returns in the months after childbirth. The responsibilities of a second new infant often put a longer damper on libido.

Middle adulthood – Testosterone levels are reduced by 50% between age 20 and age 40. Neither sex nor partners are new. Unless we make deliberate effort to avoid it, we can become bored or boring.

Surgical menopause – The surgical removal of both ovaries causes a sharp drop in testosterone, leading to diminished desire and arousal.

Natural menopause – Over the course of 3-5 years, there is a substantial decrease in testosterone, leading to decreased libido, and decreased estrogen leading to vaginal dryness, possibly making sex more difficult.

Post menopause – The biggest factor affecting sexuality in post-menopausal women is loss of partner. By age 59, 40% of women have no partners. By age 69, 58% are partnerless.

Life Style Factors

Having the primary responsibilities of raising the kids, maintaining the house, and working full time would cause any human to fall comatose into bed and refuse sexual advances.

Psychological Factors

Psychological factors that can lead to decreased desire are: poor body image; poor self image; depression; stress; post traumatic stress syndrome from being sexual abused as a child; performance anxiety.

Relationship Factors

Him – Factors that would naturally cause you to lose sexual interest would be a partner who is unsupportive, unloving, mentally or physically abusive, or cheating. A sexually ignorant partner who thinks intercourse is enough, or that TV football is foreplay, might also be a factor.

You – Do you hate that man? Are you afraid of him? Do you feel unloved? Are you in the habit of only saying no? Are you always too busy?

Both – For a sexually satisfying relationship there must be daily conversation, loving touch unconnected to sex, sharing of responsibilities, honest communication of needs. Have sex at 'prime-time' rather than when you are dead tired.

Health Factors

Sexual desire can be reduced by illness, medicines such as antidepressants, and chronic pelvic pain. 14% of women have pain during sex. 22% of women 18-24 do. Sex is not going to be attractive if it hurts.

In summary, decreased sexual desire is common. It is only a problem if it makes you unhappy or puts a cherished relationship at risk. For help, see your gynecologist, a marriage counselor, a psychologist or a sex therapist. Two excellent books are: Reclaiming Desire by Goldstein & Brandon and Reclaiming Your Sexual Self by Hall.

Michael J. Seeber, DO FACOOG