

# What is Libido?

People talk about **libido** a lot: “That person has a high libido;” or “I don’t have any libido.” When we use the word libido, we’re usually referring to a person’s “sex drive” or level of sexual desire. But what does *that* even mean?

Technically, libido is defined as sexual “**psychic energy**” and refers to *urges* and *impulses* that come from the psyche, or *mind*. Another way to think of libido is *mind energy* that relates to sexual thoughts that can help drive sexual actions to occur.

In other words, libido is the “mind” part of sex--the “*I want...*” part of the process that might lead further into sexual play. Without awareness of libido, sexual play may not be started as easily because the person isn’t ‘thinking of sex.’

Libido may:

- spring up by itself from who-knows-where
- arise from internal **physical awareness** (called interoception) such being aware of a rush of blood to your face, neck or genitals when you’re aroused
- arise when looking at an arousing **image**, or perhaps a **smell** or **sound** triggers a sexual memory
- arise from a physical gesture or **touch** by a sexual partner

However, anyone can be **willing** to begin or experience sexual activities. You don’t have to experience a welling up of desire for sexual activity to happen. **Willingness is just fine by itself** for sexual activities to proceed.

## Why does desire come and go?

Libido changes frequently (minutes, hour, day, relationship, etc.) and is responsive to many things.

**Early in new sexual relationships**, libido is often very strong. Sex drive can be the early glue that bonds you together, but it tends to settle down to a lower level between six months to two years later. Although this change concerns some people, it’s actually very normal. If libido didn’t go down a tad, how would you find time to eat, sleep, work and socialize and do other important things?

Libido can be affected by health changes, including illness, fear of illness, major hormonal events like pregnancy and menopause, surgery removing ovaries or testicles, or taking hormonal contraceptives. Some medications, such as anti-depressants, can blunt the

physical arousal process, leaving people wondering whether they desired sex at all. If you suspect that your libido has changed due to one of these factors, consult your health care provider.

But even if there is a medical reason for a change to your libido, you can still **nurture your desire** on your own. You can develop your own **awareness** of arousal and boost your desire levels intentionally.

## Do arousal creams or supplements like Spanish Fly help increase libido?

Most supplements will not do anything physically to increase your desire. The original Spanish Fly is actually toxic, and even in small quantities causes an intense urinary tract irritation leading to an infection in most people. That **irritation** is **perceived** as **arousal**, which is how it got that reputation. Because of the danger, often the products you find labeled “Spanish Fly” are non-original substitutes.

Some supplements work by *stimulating* your whole nervous system, allowing you to feel aroused more quickly, but you still need something to trigger your arousal. Other products, especially those that you rub on the skin, either produce mild *irritation* (due to ingredients like menthol or cayenne pepper), or instruct you to spend several minutes massaging the product into your genitals. **It is the rubbing that works**—which increases arousal by bringing blood flow to the area—not the supplement itself. In this case, rubbing a nice sexual lubricant into your genital skin will do the exact same thing without the risk of irritation.

## Can I change my libido?

Changing or increasing a level of libido is possible, but keep in mind that you are trying to change how your mind works. **Wanting-to-want more** can bring a level of anxiety that can work **against** the very desire you are hoping to build. Many people find that *learning to be ok* with who they already are leads to more pleasure and satisfaction with whatever sexual activities they pursue. So it may be better to learn to adapt to **how you already are**, rather than **struggle to change it**.

But to answer the question: it depends on whether or not you’ve **always** had a **lower libido**. If you have, then it is often harder to change. People with a low libido that has stayed the same for their whole adult lives often have a very difficult time changing. If you want to try to change a libido that has always been low or non-

existent, we recommend working with a sex therapist. But remember, **libido isn’t everything!** Many, many people decide whether they are willing to be sexually aroused then go for it! The more you directly stimulate your genitals (rubbing, vibration, etc), the more strongly your mind will register your sexual arousal. **That is a perfectly fine beginning to any sexual activity.** So it isn’t as important that your mind doesn’t just whip up a sexual frenzy of desire. What is more important that you go ahead and stimulate yourself and **begin** that part of the arousal cycle. Your mind will notice and move right along as long as the experience is pleasurable.

If you had a **higher libido** that is **now low**, remember that libido is an elastic state of being that can be invited back into your life. You can also enjoy pleasurable sex without having a strong libido. Desire and arousal are **two separate components**, and are run by different parts of the brain. So even if initially you feel sexually uninterested but are **willing to move forward** in a sexual experience, you can experience pleasurable sexual experiences.

## Why is my partner’s libido so different?

Some people have a very active libido and their mind leads them to think about and want sex more often. Others have a lower level of desire—they may rarely think about or want sex without some outside prompt. Others may not be interested in sex at all.

Your unique level of libido is individual, variable, and completely normal. The same is true of your partner(s). It is only a problem if someone is distressed and feels strongly that they want change. But no matter what, **you are fine the way you are** if it works for you. There is such a wide range in libido levels, that you are **normal** regardless of what anyone else thinks.

Personal levels of libido also depend on:

- our level of **stress**
- physical and mental **health**
- how many **distractions** are in the environment
- how successful and **pleasurable** our most recent sexual experiences have been
- what we have been **taught** about sex.

**Libido is pretty fragile.** If you are distracted, tired, stressed or sick, your mind will send sexual psychic energy away. Your mind will say, “Don’t think about sex; you have more important things to attend to”. This can happen even when **you** don’t **want** it to.

It is very common for partners to have different libido levels. This may only happen from time to time (due to temporary stress or illness, for example), or it may be ongoing—either way is normal. **You cannot to change your partner’s libido**, but there are ways both of you can work together to get needs met. Working with a sex therapist is a good way to begin working on this.

# Feel More Sexual Desire

Before you begin, spend some time first to help yourself feel good in your skin, so you can **feel the sexy you**. A little physical exercise, a relaxing bath, a massage or some stretching can help you feel more alive and connected to your physical self. For some people, it also helps to put on clothes or undergarments that help you feel sexy. **You are sexy, regardless of what shape or size you are.** Sexy is in the mind, too.

## Start with your body.

That seems backwards, doesn’t it? However, increasing your **awareness of your arousal** levels is one of the best boosters of personal libido. This is in your control and you can learn about, and build, that connection.

Check in with your body and make arousal happen. Pay attention to your arousal signals as you become aroused.

- Can you make pleasurable arousal happen by massaging your genitals with a **hand** or **vibrator**?
- Can you make pleasurable arousal happen when you **read** a sexy passage in a book?

## Get your mind working with your body.

Connecting your mind and body is important to your libido. Check in with your mind:

- Do you feel like you deserve sexual arousal?
- Do you feel ok about your body?

Have you ever had “good” sex that you’ve enjoyed? If so, spend some time to think about your favorite encounters or fantasies. Allow your mind to wander and **check in to feel** if your body to becomes aroused. Again, pay attention to the feeling of warmth (blood flow) in your genitals.

Sometimes it feels like your libido has disappeared when the arousal you experience is not as obvious as it used to be. Some people notice their vagina does not lubricating quickly, or that their penis does not become swiftly firm with erection. The goal is to try to recognize

and focus on different signs of arousal: a flush on your chest, tension in your nipples, or an increase in your breathing. You may notice that you are more sensitive to light as your eyes dilate.

It's also important that you take care of your body. For people who experience dryness of the vulva and vagina, we recommend massaging a moisturizing lubricant into the skin of your genitals twice a day. Massage increases the skin's elasticity and encourages blood flow so you become aroused more comfortably and easily. See the **AWT Vaginal Renewal™** brochure for more information. For people who experience less robust penile erections, see the **AWT Penile Rehabilitation** booklet.

### **Don't stop now!**

Boosting sexual desire is not a one time thing. Your goal is to bring this energy into your mind as a new, **regular habit** that you cultivate.

Allow yourself to think positive sexual thoughts throughout the day, conjuring up fantasies, remembering past sexual experiences, and envisioning sexual activities you'd like to enjoy. Think about the variety of sexual activities you find pleasurable, such as genital massage, oral sex or penetration. Anything that is comfortable and gives you genuine pleasure is fair game. When you do this is up to you. The point is to think about the whole concept of sexual desire as something you actively invite in.

### **Then, try something a little frisky...**

Invite **yourself** on a sex date. If you did not pleasure yourself sexually before now, it's time to begin. Make self-pleasure a part of your self-care routine. Learn how your body responds to erotic thoughts, stories, or images. Erotic books and movies of all kinds are available to help you expand your fantasies and nurture your arousal, and can be incorporated into self-pleasuring and partner sex alike.

Pleasuring yourself will help you know how your body feels when you become aroused, and what kinds of touch and sensation feel best to you. Then, when or if you choose to have sex with a partner, you can teach your partner what you've learned about yourself. If you enjoy vaginal and/or anal penetration, include that in your self-pleasuring, exploring how deeply you like to be penetrated and what width is most comfortable. For more brochures about self-pleasuring, see **Self Pleasuring for People with Vulvas & Vaginas** and/or the

**Self Pleasuring for People with Penises & Prostates.**

### **But what do I do with my partner if I'm not yet ready for sex with them?**

Work on your **sensual** connection. Take time to give and receive massages and enjoy touch and sensation without the pressure to go further. The goal is to get or stay more emotionally connected with your partner. If he or she is willing, encourage your partner to self-pleasure, adding an erotic toy and/or movie if desired.

When you're ready, try genital massage with your partner using a personal lubricant as your massage lotion (oil can be irritating to the genitals). Focus on giving and receiving pleasure. Experiment with a variety of activities: kissing, making out, whole body touch, oral sex, mutual self-pleasuring, or any other intimate activities you want to explore. When you are ready, plan to massage each other to orgasm, focusing on the sensations of arousal and orgasm. If you become interested in penetration with your partner, massage each other first until you are both quite aroused and ready for penetration.

### **Keep sex play going.**

It helps to create some **uninterrupted** space for your sex life. Make a date with yourself and/or your partner to enjoy one or two hours of pleasure without answering the phone, dealing with the kids, or thinking about work pressures. Schedule time for sex and choose a time when you are relaxed and comfortable.

Try not to get too hung up on the idea that you lose spontaneity when you schedule sex. Remember, what you do sexually can still be spontaneous, even if the timing isn't. Plus, knowing you will be having sex at a certain time creates anticipation, which may heighten your arousal.

If orgasms are important to you, make sure you get the stimulation you need to have at least one orgasm during sex play. Let yourself fantasize before and during sex. It's a harmless way to increase your arousal. Don't concentrate on making your fantasies come true, instead, enjoy the wild sexual field trips your mind can take. Many people find that their fantasies can lose their charge once they are acted out, so focus on enjoying the arousal you get from them now.

Keep in mind that variety helps keep sex interesting and exciting. This may mean trying new positions and locations, exploring different types of sexual activities

(oral sex, mutual pleasuring), or adding a toy or movie to the mix—you decide. The **Kama Sutra**, an ancient marriage manual, recommends incorporating **taste, smell, sound** and different **sensations** to make sex play even more rewarding.

Building your own history of pleasurable, comfortable sexual experiences will encourage your libido to grow. Making time for sex and keeping yourself healthy and relaxed also encourages your libido to come out and play more often. **As one woman said, "You know, the more I have sex, the more I want to have sex."**

### **Suggested Resources:**

**Better Sex through Mindfulness.** A straight-forward, detailed guide with exercises for you to cultivate your personal sexual desire. Exercises were designed and researched using mindfulness techniques to increase your mind's awareness of your arousal responses. Written with a focus on feminine people, it can soften personal expectations of "how it's supposed/used to be" and allows you to reconnect to the self by learning the subtle sensations, present moment awareness and acceptance, and cultivation of your own desires in life, sex and relationships.

**The Deep Yes: the lost art of true receiving.** For those who have a hard time letting go and receiving pleasure, this book presents compelling case for committing to a different way of being, and offers a holistic and empowering guide for embracing the practice of saying "YES" to life, pleasure and love.

**From Madness to Mindfulness: reinventing sex for women,** provides tools for you find your sexuality on your own terms. Aimed primarily at heterosexual women, this book offers stories and exercises to help you discover your sexual self from the inside out. It is supportive, funny, encouraging and practical.

**Mating in Captivity.** A refreshing, original look at the way sexual relationships change over time, the choices we make that create those changes, and what we can do to rekindle the flames.

**Reclaiming Your Sexual Self,** by Kathryn Hall, PhD—Discusses the reasons people experience low libido and gives helpful suggestions for creating the right conditions in your life for more desire and libido.

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# Libido

~what is libido?

~what to do if your libido is not what you want it to be

~how to spark your libido when you wish

~what can you do when a partner has a different libido than you



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