Sometimes surgery can change where someone finds touch arousing. Transfeminine people who have undergone confirmation surgery sometimes notice that the tip of the clitoris is less sensitive due to surgical scarring. They may enjoy massage of the clitoral legs underneath the lips more and find that sexually arousing. Experimentation is the key to discovering your personal arousal points.

What Happens Before Orgasm?

Human sexual arousal is turned off most of the time because it would be hard to get anything done in life if we were always sexually aroused. Sexual arousal involves unconsciously checking for safety, personal willingness to engage in sexual behavior, turning the suppression off, then building the fire of arousal. The period of high arousal just before orgasm is sometimes referred to as the Plateau Phase. The amount of time spent in this phase varies from person to person.

Some people experience frustration during the plateau phase, believing they are taking too long to have an orgasm or feeling like something isn’t working. Each person experiences different lengths of time on the plateau and any length of time is completely normal. The plateau can be a very pleasurable place to be even if you do not have an orgasm. Many people find this period of high arousal to be the most pleasurable part of sex play. It isn’t necessary to have an orgasm to have complete sexual satisfaction. We encourage you to enjoy all phases of arousal.

What Is An Orgasm?

An orgasm (sometimes referred to as a climax) is a pleasurable peak experience most often brought on by sexual stimulation. First, the mind becomes aware of a tension related to the orgasmic threshold. Once sufficient stimulation triggers orgasm, the brain releases pleasurable chemicals into the blood stream and causes pulsing contractions of the pelvic floor muscles.

All orgasms take different amounts of stimulation time and intensity. When adequate arousal stimulation time doesn’t happen, orgasms don’t happen. Some orgasms feel huge, some feel small, and others somewhere in between. No two orgasms are exactly alike.

What determines whether an orgasm will happen?

Every person is different. The amount of time it takes a person to reach orgasm is individual and can change from day to day. What feels intensely pleasurable for one person may be too much or not enough stimulation for another. A person’s frame of mind, stress level, stage of the menstrual cycle or menopause all contribute to their perception of arousal, pleasure and orgasmic potential. Medications, especially SSRIs and SNRIs antidepressants, can increase the effort required to reach the orgasm threshold, so more time and/or more intense stimulation may be required to reach a climax.

Some level of relaxation is necessary for arousal to begin. Factors that could inhibit sexual arousal include:

- stress
- concerns about work, kids, or a partner
- worries about body image
- religious, cultural, or family teachings
- unhealthy physical status
- being reluctant to engage in sexual play
- poor communication
- poor knowledge of technique
- unwanted pain or unwanted body movement
- worrying about having an orgasm

The body and mind give priority to stressful thoughts and prevent us from focusing on arousal when safety is perceived to be at risk. Stress is managed by the same defensive response system (flight, flight, freeze or faint) that suppresses sexual arousal and keeps us aware of our surroundings and responsive to threat.

If stress is inhibiting sexual arousal, it helps to consciously choose to set yourself up with a time and place where you can feel safe, relaxed and sexually willing to enjoy sexual pleasure. It also helps to learn your personal mind-body sexual resonance patterns so you can manage stressful intrusive thoughts.

The Role of Self-Pleasure

Self-pleasuring is one of the most effective ways to determine what types of stimulation are most pleasurable for you and what kinds of touch you prefer. It’s a great way to get to know yourself and your body, allowing you to experience pleasure without the pressure of anyone else’s expectations. Many people find self-pleasuring a good place to start exploring if they have never experienced an orgasm.

Once you learn your preferred pleasure techniques, you can share what you have learned with a partner. Communicating in this way can help you build and increase arousal during partner sex while taking an active role in defining your pleasure and preferences. For more techniques to explore during self-pleasuring, see our Self-pleasuring for Women brochure.
Orgasm Challenges

Rare or Absent Orgasms

This might be a technique issue. If you are relying solely on vaginal penetration alone to climax to orgasm, know that fewer than 30% of women have orgasms during vaginal penetration alone. Success more often occurs people add additional, direct stimulation to the clitoris by a hand or vibrator. Incorporating positions and techniques that allow you or a partner to provide focused clitoral stimulation can make orgasm more likely. If you enjoy sex the way it is and you don’t feel the need to make any changes, that is alright. Success more often occurs people add additional, direct stimulation to the clitoris by a hand or vibrator. Incorporating positions and techniques that allow you or a partner to provide focused clitoral stimulation can make orgasm more likely.

Consult a health care provider if you think an issue is affecting your ability to have orgasms, consider a sex counselor or therapist to help you work through these issues. It is important to communicate that this is not about their skills as lovers and that you feel just fine the way you are. Often, partners worry that they are doing something wrong and that you are not enjoying the sexual contact. It can be helpful to reassure your partner(s) and communicate about the kinds of touch you enjoy, and what contributes to your sexual satisfaction. However, if you feel that your inability to have an orgasm is blocking your ability to have orgasms, consider a sex counselor or therapist to help you work through what you both are experiencing and feeling.

Changes in Intensity or Frequency

There are many reasons why people’s orgasms change. Some common physical causes of change are:

• medications
• circulatory problems
• metabolic disorders like diabetes
• neurologic disorders like Multiple Sclerosis
• scar tissue or nerve damage from surgery or radiation therapy

These physical issues can stop or inhibit the body from responding to the mind’s call to sexual arousal. Some common issues are:

• stress
• distraction from, or inability to focus
• physical or emotional trauma

All of these factors hamper the mind’s ability to focus during the internal conversation of mind-body resonance or arousal conversation. Consult a mental health, couples or sex therapist to understand more about your situation.

If you’ve experienced a change, experiment to find new tools and techniques that help manipulate your sexual arousal patterns. Ask yourself: “Is this pleasurable right now?” Don’t worry if arousal builds and fades as you experiment—that’s normal. Always try not to be goal-oriented. Removing the pressure to have an orgasm often makes it easier to have one.

Some common physical causes of change are:

• scar tissue or nerve damage from surgery or radiation therapy
• metabolic disorders like diabetes
• circulatory problems
• medications

Sensitivity of vulva has changed

If your clitoris doesn’t feel as sensitive as you would like it to be and you’ve tried using a variety of vibrators with no success, you might want to try using a vacuum pump on your clitoris or vulva once you are aroused part way. This increases the blood flow to your clitoris, making it more engorged and therefore more sensitive.

Having More, Better Orgasms

Expand your field of play. Many people find that they have longer orgasms when they incorporate a wide variety of stimulation to all of the parts of their bodies that they enjoy touch. Stroking and caressing many different nerve endings will intensify your arousal and pleasure. In addition, the longer you pleasure your whole body, the more intense your orgasms may be. This means exploring all those places that feel wonderful when you or your partner strokes, licks, or rubs the body.

Peaking is the process of stimulating yourself almost to the peak of orgasm and then stopping or decreasing the intensity of stimulation to delay orgasm. By restarting your stimulation—increasing then decreasing until you decide to orgasm—can magnify the overall experience of orgasm. Peaking extends the time in which you are experiencing higher levels of arousal and can result in a more intense-feeling orgasm.

Practice. The more frequently you have orgasms, the more intense your orgasms will likely be. The mind-body connection becomes stronger when you successfully use it. Although it may take longer to have orgasms when you have them often, many people report stronger, more satisfying orgasms when they set aside regular sessions for orgasmic self-pleasure.

Resources

Come As You Are by Emily Nagoski
Elusive Orgasm by Vivienne Cass
Multi-Orgasmic Woman by Mantak Chia & Dr. Rachel Carlson Abrams
OWow by Jenny Block