

# HOW SEX CAN HELP YOU LIVE LONGER

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**W**HEN it comes to sex, there's no other month like August. Lingerie retailer Ann Summers reported a 40 per cent rise in sales last August as shoppers took advantage of the holiday period to boost their sex lives.

Meanwhile, researchers from Boston State Hospital in the U.S. have found that summer sun at least doubles levels of the sex hormone testosterone, boosting a flagging libido.

This is thought to be because the sun's rays trigger vitamin D production, which

in turn boosts production of the hormone. And if another excuse is needed, it's well known that sex burns calories — just this week a survey found that 87 per cent of women named sex as their favourite way to exercise (shopping came second).

But there are many other benefits, too. Here some of the country's leading experts reveal some little-known facts about why sex is good for your health.

## ■ IT'S A GOOD WAY TO TEST YOUR EYES

SEX relaxes the muscles and alleviates neck and shoulder tension, says Dr Arun Ghosh, a GP specialising in sexual health at the Spire Liverpool Hospital. And surprisingly, it might also tell you whether you need glasses.

'I've had patients complain of poor vision after sex. What's happened is that, like all the other muscles in the body, their eye muscles have relaxed and are performing at their true ability, rather than straining and squinting as they would normally.'

So if your sight goes blurry after sex, it's worth going for an eye test.

## ■ IT PROTECTS AGAINST HEART DISEASE

SEX can have a protective effect on the heart. A study at Queen's University in Belfast found that having sex three times a week could halve the risk of heart attack or stroke.

Another study in Israel found that women who had two orgasms a week were up to 30 per cent less likely to have heart disease than those who didn't enjoy sex or didn't orgasm.

**Dr Lisa Turner**, a sex and relationship therapist, says: 'One theory is that these women may have felt depressed, which has been linked with an increased risk of a heart attack. The endorphins released during sex also neutralise the stress hormones in the body, which are linked to heart disease.'

And the old cliché of sex causing heart attacks? It's a very low risk — it accounts for less than 1 per cent of all deaths,' says Dr Graham Jackson, consultant cardiologist at the London Bridge Hospital and chairman of the Sexual Advice Association.

However, if you're over 50, overweight and unfit, there is a risk to your heart — just as there would be if you suddenly and vigorously took up any form of exercise.

'What also increases the risk is extra-marital affairs, and this has been proven by three large studies,' says Dr Jackson.

'In fact, this accounts for 75 per cent of heart-related deaths from sex, 90 per cent of which are older

men. It's thought the combination of high-fat foods and alcohol — wining and dining — combined with vigorous exercise, often with a younger partner, is what tends to trigger the heart event.'

## ■ IT'LL STRENGTHEN YOUR BONES

U.S. RESEARCH found menopausal women who had sex every week had oestrogen levels twice as high as their abstaining counterparts. The hormone has a protective effect in bone health and a lack of it after the menopause has been linked with osteoporosis.

'Regular sex increases the production of oestrogen,' says Dr Peter Bowen-Simpkins of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists.

## ■ IT MAKES YOU MORE FERTILE

'I'M OFTEN asked whether penis length affects fertility and the good news is no,' says Dr Ghosh.

But the amount of sex you have is important. The more often you make love, the better quality your sperm will be. 'If you're trying to conceive, you need the sperm to be as fresh as possible — not stuff that's been sitting in the prostate for three or four days,' he adds.

## ■ IT STAVES OFF PROSTATE CANCER

RESEARCHERS at Nottingham University have found that men who enjoy a regular sex life in their 50s are at lower risk of developing prostate cancer. 'Clearing the prostate out regularly is the reason behind this,' says Dr Ghosh.

'The link was suggested after research showed that monks appear to have a higher chance of developing prostate cancer.'

## ■ IT'LL HELP YOU QUIT SMOKING

HERE'S a simple way to get your man to kick his smoking habit — remind him that it causes the penis to shrink and can cause impotence.

Erections are all about good blood flow, and lighting up worsens blood flow to the spongy tissues in the penis, says Raj Persad, consultant urological surgeon at Bristol Royal Infirmary.

'As a result, they become starved of oxygen and the delicate cells

die away. They then become fibrotic — forming scar tissue — which is less elastic and less able to expand during an erection than regular healthy tissue.'

Smoking is also a known cause of erectile dysfunction as it causes hardening of the arteries and hampers good blood flow.

A study of more 7,000 Chinese men, published in the American Journal of Epidemiology, found that the more cigarettes smoked a day, the higher the risk of impotence.

## ■ IT'S A NATURAL SEDATIVE

FOR a man, a powerful orgasm is

the equivalent of having a 2-3mg shot of diazepam (or Valium), says Dr Ghosh. 'And diazepam works as a muscle relaxant which is why so many men nod off after finishing — there really is a biological reason.'

Women benefit emotionally, too. 'The endorphins released during sex can really help treat depression and clear the mind.'

'One endorphin is serotonin, known as the happy hormone; the other is the endogenous endorphin and this creates a sense of bliss (orgasm) for five to ten seconds in men — and up to four or five minutes in women, which is excellent for mental health.'

'One theory is that women orgasm for longer because their cervix is contracting to draw the sperm up towards the ovaries.'

## ■ IT GUARDS AGAINST INCONTINENCE

PROVIDING that a woman is fairly active during sex, then it's a good workout for her pelvic floor muscles, says Dr Gillian Vanhegan, a spokesman for the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists.

The muscles that stem the flow of urine, reducing leakage and incontinence, all benefit and this reduces the risk of stress incontinence and prolapse later in life, both of which are very common.

'After having children many women don't have the time to do dedicated pelvic floor exercises, so sex provides a natural workout.'

## ■ AND FINALLY ... USE IT OR LOSE IT

JUST like smoking or diabetes, a lack of regular blood flow to the penis will over time cause some of the tissues to die,' says Mr Persad.

Indeed, Finnish research has confirmed that men who had sex less than once a week at the start of the study were twice as likely to develop erectile dysfunction as those who had it at least once a week.

In the study of 1,000 men aged between 55 and 75, those who had sex three or more times a week lowered their risk fourfold.

There's no reason not to enjoy a full sex life in old age, adds Dr Jackson.

'We have some patients in their 80s taking Viagra-type drugs and studies have shown that a regular sex life can prolong life — it's basically another form of exercise.'

'There seems to be a myth that you're past it once you hit 65, but that's rubbish.'

■ THE Sexual Advice Association:

