

# Sexual Response in Women

## What is the normal pattern of sexual response in women?

Like men, your sexual response as a woman has several stages. They include:

- Desire
- Excitement (arousal)
- Plateau of high arousal
- Orgasm
- Resolution

Your sexual response starts with a desire for sexual intimacy. This is also called libido.

During the excitement stage, the vagina gets moister and vaginal muscles start to relax as your body gets ready for sex. Your heart starts beating faster and your blood pressure goes up. You breathe faster.

During the plateau stage, the excitement is stronger and lasts longer. This is the highest level of sexual excitement before orgasm. Breathing is heavier and your muscles start to contract. The vagina swells from increased blood flow.

Orgasm is defined as waves of muscle contractions that happen in the vagina and throughout the body. It may last only seconds. Some women have orgasms regularly with sex and some women do not. This is normal.

During the resolution stage, you start to relax. Your heartbeat and breathing slow down and blood drains out of the swollen genital area. You may be sweating. You may feel sleepy.

## What can affect a woman's sexual response?

Many things can affect your sexual response--for example, illness, depression, stress, tiredness, age, a history of sexual abuse, alcohol, and drugs (legal and illegal). For example:

- You may have pain during sex. The pain may be caused by infection, hormone changes, or other physical problems.
- It may be hard for you to have an orgasm.
- You may feel uncomfortable with sex or feel that you are not getting enough support from your partner.
- You may feel pressured or have a fear of pregnancy.
- You may have a history of sexual abuse.

You can talk to your healthcare provider about getting help for these problems.

## How can I learn more about this?

You can get books about the emotional and physical aspects of sexuality and sexual response at stores and libraries. Talking to a friend or family member may also be helpful. If you feel you have a problem, make an appointment with your healthcare provider. While sometimes it is hard to talk about intimate sex concerns, you do not need to be embarrassed. Healthcare providers are skilled at discussing these issues.

Additional information is available from:

- American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists  
Phone: (202) 638-5577  
Web site: <http://www.acog.org>
- American Association of Sex Education Counselors and Therapists  
Web site: <http://www.aasect.org>
- American Psychological Association  
Phone: (800) 374-2721  
Web site: <http://www.apa.org>
- Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States  
Phone: (212) 819-9770  
Web site: <http://www.siecus.org>

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