

Lots of women find it difficult to have an orgasm and there are many factors which can be the cause. Good communication with your partner and lots of practise can often be the best way to enjoy sex. Many women are able to experience orgasm through clitoral stimulation rather than vaginal penetration. Practising on your own (masturbation) and working out what feels good can help, as can spending more time on foreplay. Remember that most women take more time to become aroused than men do.

Another common problem for women is low libido. This can be related to a variety of factors, including contraception, relationship problems and stress. Sometimes changing the form of contraception you are using can improve the situation – speak to a doctor for more details. Counselling is an option if you think the problem may be relationship-related.

### Consider Contraception

There is a wide variety of safe and reliable contraception methods available for women. It's important to discuss the options with a doctor to make sure you choose the best method to suits your needs.

Sometimes accidents happen. If you've had unprotected sex or the condom breaks or comes off during sex, emergency contraception can be taken to reduce the risk of pregnancy.

Emergency contraception is available over the counter at pharmacies, and is most effective when taken within 24 hours of having sex (though there is some effectiveness for up to 5 days afterwards).

### Protect Your Fertility

There are lots of things you can do if you are preparing for pregnancy. As no amount of alcohol is known to be safe during pregnancy, it is recommended that woman avoid alcohol altogether when pregnant, and limit caffeine intake. It is best to give up smoking before you get pregnant, and avoid taking social drugs.

In addition to eating well, it is recommended that women who are planning a pregnancy take a supplement of folate (0.5 mg per day) in the 4-6 weeks before conception and during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy to help prevent their baby being born with neural tube defects.

As many people with an STI have no symptoms, it is possible to have one and not know it. For this reason it is a good idea for both partners to consider testing before trying to conceive, as STIs can be passed on to a baby at birth with serious consequences. If left untreated, some STIs can also lead to infertility.

### Need More?

Please see our 'Contraception' brochure and the 'Planning for Pregnancy' information sheet for more information.

For more information contact:

FPWA Sexual Health Services  
70 Roe Street, Northbridge WA 6003  
Ph 08 9227 6177  
info@fpwa.org.au

Sexual Health Helpline  
Metropolitan callers 08 9227 6178  
Country callers 1800 198 205  
sexhelp@fpwa.org.au

Roe St Centre for human relationships  
70 Roe Street, Northbridge WA 6003  
Ph 08 9228 3693  
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# Looking After Your Sexual Health

CHAPTER 1

The Difference Between Women and Men



## A Guide For Women

*In a world focused on body image, many women forget about the importance of their sexual health. Keeping up to date with Pap smears, protecting yourself against sexually transmissible infections (STIs), and having things like painful periods or sex checked by a health professional are all part of looking after your sexual health. Taking care of your sexual health helps you to feel good about yourself, and contributes to your overall wellbeing.*

## Have Regular Pap Smears

A Pap smear is a simple test used to detect early changes in the cells of the cervix (the lower end of the womb or uterus). Without treatment, these changes can lead to cancer. Regular Pap smears help detect early warning signs of cervical cancer and allow women to receive treatment before the cancer develops.

A Pap smear can only be performed when you don't have your period, with the ideal time being a week or so after you have stopped bleeding. While some women find Pap smears mildly uncomfortable, they are rarely painful and usually only take a few minutes.

An instrument called a speculum is gently inserted into the vagina so the cervix can be seen clearly (you can insert the speculum yourself if you wish). Cells are gently wiped from around the cervix with a small spatula onto a glass slide. After the cells are collected on the glass slide they are sent to a laboratory to be examined under a microscope for any changes or abnormalities. An abnormal Pap smear result very rarely means you have cancer, but it is important to discuss your results with your clinician and what treatment, if any, you should have.



One of the main causes of cervical cancer is the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV), which is passed on through sexual activity. All women between the ages of 18 and 70 who have ever had sex (with men or women) should have a Pap smear every two years, even if they no longer have sex. There is no need to have Pap smears earlier than 18, even if you start having sex earlier. Your clinician may recommend you have more frequent Pap smears if a previous one showed significant cell changes.

A cervical cancer vaccine is available for young women. Women who are vaccinated still need to continue having regular Pap smears as the vaccine only protects against certain types of HPV.

It is important to remember that a Pap smear only tests for changes to the cervix. However, it is possible to be tested for some sexually transmissible infections at the same time as your Pap smear if you wish – talk to your clinician for more information.

## Be Breast Aware

All women need to be aware of their breasts. Become familiar with your breasts and know their look and feel (this can change at different times during your menstrual cycle). Things to look for include:

- a lump or thickening in the breast
- any sudden change in breast size or shape
- changes to the skin of the breast, such as dimpling or a rash
- persistent or unusual pain
- discharge from the nipple

If you notice any of these changes, see a doctor immediately. Remember, breast pain or lumps in the breast rarely mean you have cancer.

## Periods and PMS

It is common for women to experience some pain or discomfort associated with their menstrual cycle, and for the most part this doesn't interfere with their lifestyle. However, if your periods suddenly become much more painful, or if the pain is severe, seek help from a health professional.

Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS) refers to physical and emotional changes that some women experience in the second half of the menstrual cycle before their period begins. Many women experience some symptoms of PMS, but for most they are mild. Symptoms can include:

- mood changes, such as irritability, sadness or anger
- tiredness, nausea and headaches
- food cravings
- aches and pains, including sore breasts
- abdominal bloating

Symptoms that persist throughout the entire month may not be related to PMS and should be discussed with a doctor. While PMS can't be cured or prevented, having a healthy and active lifestyle can help reduce symptoms. Changing your method of contraception or taking medication can also help – talk to a health professional for more information.

## Play it Safe in the Bedroom...

An STI is an infection that can be passed on through vaginal, anal or oral sex. Most STIs are transmitted through an exchange of body fluids, but some can be passed on through skin to skin genital contact. Some STIs are easily treated with antibiotics if detected early, but can have long-term consequences if left untreated, including infertility.

Many STIs have no symptoms, so it's possible to have one and not know it.

Symptoms can include:

- unusual discharge from the vagina
- itchiness around the genital area
- a burning sensation when peeing
- a rash, sores or small lumps on or around the vagina or anus
- unusual bleeding from the vagina

If you notice any of these symptoms, or if you've had unprotected sex in the past, get tested by a doctor or at FPWA. Consider discussing your symptoms with any sexual partners. Testing for STIs is quick and painless - it only takes a few minutes and usually involves a urine sample and a vaginal swab. Sometimes symptoms go away by themselves, but this doesn't mean the infection has gone.

Condoms and dams help reduce the risk of getting or passing on an STI (a dam is a thin latex square held over the vaginal or anal area during oral sex) by stopping semen, blood and vaginal fluids from being exchanged. As some STIs can be passed on through skin to skin contact, it's important to remember that condoms and dams only protect the area of skin they cover.

Always use water-based lubricants with condoms, as oil-based lubricants like Vaseline and massage oil weaken condoms and increase the risk of breakage.

## ...and Enjoy Yourself

While enjoying your sexual experiences is an important part of looking after your sexual health, many women experience pain during sex. This can often be caused by a lack of vaginal lubrication, anxiety, or not being aroused enough. Over the counter lubricants can be helpful. If you are experiencing persistent painful sex see a health professional.