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## Patient information: Sexual problems in women (Beyond the Basics)

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### SEXUAL PROBLEMS OVERVIEW

Sexual problems are common and can occur in women of any age. In the United States, approximately 40 percent of women have sexual concerns and 12 percent report distressing sexual problems [1].

Sexual dysfunction is a term used to describe difficulties in libido (sex drive), arousal, orgasm, or pain with sex that is bothersome to an individual. Sexual dysfunction may be a lifelong problem or acquired later in life after a period of having no difficulties with sex.

Women are most likely to be satisfied with their sex lives if they are physically and psychologically healthy and have a good relationship with their partner. Although a host of changes in hormones, blood vessels, the brain, and vaginal area can affect a woman's sexuality, relationship difficulties and poor physical or psychological well-being are the most common causes of sexual problems.

This article will discuss causes as well as treatments that are available to help women who have problems with sex. Sexual problems in men are discussed separately. (See "[Patient information: Sexual problems in men \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)".)

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### SEXUAL PROBLEMS TERMINOLOGY

It is important to know the definitions of several terms used to describe the sexual response to understand related sexual problems.

**Desire (libido)** — Libido, or sex drive, is the desire to have sexual activity, and often involves sexual thoughts, images, and wishes. Desire may occur spontaneously or in response to a partner, thoughts, or images. Spontaneous desire is more common in new relationships while response to a partner's desire is more typical of long-term relationships.

Sexual desire is not essential to have a satisfactory sex life. In other words, a woman who does not think about or initiate sex does not necessarily have a problem.

**Arousal (excitement)** — Arousal is a sense of sexual pleasure, often accompanied by an increase in blood flow to the genitals and an increased heart rate, blood pressure, and rate of breathing.

**Orgasm** — Orgasm is defined as a peaking of sexual pleasure and release of sexual tension, usually with contractions of the muscles in the genital area and reproductive organs. A woman who never or rarely