

## *Am I Normal?*

As a sex therapist, I get a lot of questions from people wanting to know what is “normal.” People vary so widely in their sexual thoughts, attitudes and behavior that defining “what is normal” is difficult if not **completely impossible**. A good rule to follow about normalcy for you is: whatever you and your partner decide will be pleasurable for you both. This month, I’m sharing with you the most commonly asked questions, with some brief responses. Enjoy!

### **What is “healthy sexuality”?**

I am asked this question a lot, particularly by people who have a history of sexual assault or abuse. According to the World Health Organization, “Sexual health is a state of physical, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality. It requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence.” I would like to add to that definition that if your activity is consensual, pleasurable and outside the sight and sound of non-willing participants, than it is healthy. It’s that simple.

### **How *often* is normal?**

The estimated average frequency for couples in their 30s and 40s seems to be 1-2 times per week. That said, frequency should be based on what you and your partner are both happy with, not what you think is “normal.” Depending on what else is going on in your life, you will find that your libido ebbs and flows. Several factors can influence your sexual libido, including: length of time in the relationship, overall health, job stress, medications, life stress, having children, aging, and/or problems in your relationship. Having children tends to put quite a bit of strain on couples physically, emotionally, and financially. This then carries over into the bedroom for them. If you think that having small children has put a damper on your sex life, I highly recommend that you carve out more time for each other—without the kids. Even a “date night” twice per month can do **wonders** for the quality of a couple’s relationship.

It is normal for people to have periods of time in their lives where they have less sexual interest or desire. In addition to the aforementioned stressors, what we like and what feels good to us may change as we age, especially in our 70s and 80s. Expect more time to be spent on arousal for both partners. After age 70, sexual activity may be more pleasure-focused instead of goal-focused, putting less pressure on the need for intercourse or an orgasm. This can be very intimate and bring intense feelings of closeness for couples. Another benefit is that after retirement age, couples have more time to spend with each other, without the burdens of work-related stress, child rearing, etc. So, if you are someone who is afraid of “getting old” just think about how wonderful your sex life will be when you can devote more time and energy to it!

In general, I suggest that couples focus on the quality of their sexual encounters versus the frequency of them. Chances are if both partners experience intense feelings of love, intimacy, and closeness during sexual activity, then

they will both be eager to engage in it with their partner again (sooner, rather than later!). Most importantly, remember that an amazing sex life starts with open and honest communication in the bedroom.

## Does size matter?

The short answer to this question is that it all depends on who you ask... If you are concerned with pleasuring a female partner, it should be noted that the average length of the vagina is between 3 and 4 inches. The average length of the male penis is between 5.1 and 5.9 inches. It is of note that circumcised men are, on average, 8 millimeters shorter than those who are uncircumcised (for obvious reasons). Given the anatomical structures, the average length is more than adequate, especially since females have the most feeling via nerve endings in the outermost section of the vagina (approximately the first 1.5 inches). With this in mind, girth may be more important than length. Girth is based on the circumference, with an average diameter being 1.5 inches. If your girth is on the *slim* side, encourage your partner to do Kegel exercises. This will strengthen the vaginal opening and will improve pleasurable sensations for both of you.

In general, size tends to be something that men worry about far more than women do. As noted by Cory Silverberg, “An Internet-based survey of 52,031 heterosexual men and women found that while 85% of women were satisfied with their partners’ penis size, only 55% of the men were satisfied with their penis size” (2011). This may be due to comparing themselves to unrealistic ideas or standards set in magazines or movies. Whatever the reason, clearly men seem to care about this a lot more than women and don’t seem to realize it. The constant barrage of commercials and emails offering “male enhancement” certainly aren’t helping the matter. Talk to your partner. If they are happy, you should be to! 😊

## Does menopause affect desire?

Sexuality, unlike fertility is part of who we are as humans, and continues to be a part of us throughout the lifecycle. The idea that sexual desire and sexual activity have to fade away with age is a myth. We do have to communicate our changing needs and expectations, as our bodies and what feels good to us will both change with age. As noted in the section above, our sexual interests change as we age, but our sexuality in general doesn’t just disappear. How we feel about our bodies and how we feel about our relationship(s) tend to have the most influence on our sexual feelings. Around the time of menopause, the impact of the reduction of estrogen on your body varies from woman to woman. For some women, this may cause a change in their feelings about sex. Some may be less interested, while others feel freer and less inhibited. The loss of the fear of pregnancy may be part of what makes some women feel more relaxed and free after menopause (i.e.- after one full year without a period).

Many women who experience problems with sexual functioning after menopause report increased vaginal dryness, weight gain, skin changes, and stiffness in muscles or joints. These may all contribute to lower sexual desire and decreased pleasure. If you have found this to be true for you or your partner, than it is important to take steps to try to combat these symptoms. First, make sure you are using a lubricant during sexual activity. I highly recommend Pjur Eros Bodyglide Original. It has a very natural feel, it is long-lasting, latex safe, and it doesn’t get sticky. Second, if weight gain has affected your body image or self-esteem, try to increase your daily activity to lose some of the gained weight. A walk with your partner every day can not only help to reduce some of the natural weight gain but it will also improve your blood circulation and overall health. Finally, take a warm bath to soothe stiff muscles or aching joints. If you have a tub that is big enough, have your partner join you! Need I say more? 😊

If you have a question about sexual health or healing, and would like it answered in a future LWM article, please visit my website and go through the “Contact Us” page to send me an email with your question. Please title the subject as: Living Well Magazine Q & A

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Dr. Dianna Palimere is a Psychosexual therapist and Licensed Clinical Social Worker. She has been in the field of mental health for the past 11 years, dedicating the past six years to specializing in clinical sexuality. She holds a BS in Psychology, a Masters degree in Social Work, a Masters degree in Human Sexuality Education, and a PhD in Clinical Human Sexuality. Utilizing a holistic approach to therapy, she incorporates a variety of clinical interventions in her work with individuals, couples, and families. She is devoted to helping people achieve sexual health and healing through her work as a psychotherapist in her private practice, as well as in her work with local nonprofit organizations. To learn more about her or to schedule an appointment, visit her website: [www.SexTherapyInDelaware.com](http://www.SexTherapyInDelaware.com), or call her office at (302) 691-3730.