

Top 6 Causes of Low Sex Drive

One of the more frequently reported sexual issues concerning both men and women today is that of having a low sex drive, or low libido. There have been numerous studies on the topic and the statistics are quite varied ranging from approximately 30-50% of females reporting low sexual desire and 25-40% of males reporting low sexual desire. In addition, researchers like Michele Weiner-Davis, have found that “20% of married couples report low-sex or no-sex marriages.” Unfortunately, there is no simple solution to this problem (for those who are unhappy with their level of sexual desire). There are many things that could negatively affect one’s sex drive, including medical, physical, mental, and emotional issues. Adequate hormone production is necessary for a healthy sex drive, in both men and women, and a hormone imbalance could be caused by any number of reasons. Despite there being numerous possibilities, I’ve narrowed it down here to the most common causes for having a low sex drive.

Sleep

Low levels of testosterone in both men and women have been reported to cause issues with sexual desire. Sleep deprivation directly affects hormone production, including the production of Testosterone. Whether it’s due to shift work, insomnia, or recently having a baby; inadequate sleep at night leads to less sexual desire. Anna North from Buzzfeed.com noted a 2011 study which found that getting “less than five hours of sleep at night was associated with a significant drop in men’s testosterone levels.” Researchers at the Insomnia and Behavioral Sleep Medicine Program at the Stanford University Sleep Medicine Center, claim the sleep-deprived men and women in their studies report a decreased interest in sex. While low testosterone may only be one possible cause for low sexual desire, lack of sleep also causes mental and physical fatigue; which is also likely to decrease interest in sexual activity.

In addition, several recent studies have found that sleep apnea can cause erectile dysfunction in men, and a loss of sexual libido in women. It is of note that with treatment for sleep apnea (e.g. CPAP machines, surgery, weight loss, etc.) people have reported a marked decrease in symptoms of sexual dysfunction.

Nutrition

In the LWM June 2012 issue, I covered this topic exclusively with my “Feed Your Desire for a Healthier Sex Life” article. A few of the libido killers included in that article were: cigarettes, trans fats, sugary foods, some starchy foods, and excessive alcohol. Focusing specifically on low sexual desire, the worst foods for your body are those high in sodium (salt), high saturated fat, and sugar. Eating foods high in sodium, especially if you are not drinking enough water, can cause dehydration, headaches, and vaginal dryness; all of which contribute to low libido. Foods containing high saturated fats can clog arteries, reducing blood flow to the body’s organs, including sex organs. Inadequate blood flow to the sex organs can cause decreased sensation in both men and women, erectile dysfunction in men, and difficulty with orgasm in women.

Finally, we have sugar...the arch nemesis of human sexual libido! I can't stress enough the overall negative impact that a diet high in sugar has on the body and subsequently the human sexual response system. Many studies have shown that sugar intake reduces the body's production of Testosterone. According to a 2013 study in *Clinical Endocrinology* (Caronia, L.M., et. al) "Glucose (sugar) ingestion induces a significant decrease in total and free Testosterone levels in men." While there is less research involving females, more some studies have focused on female sexuality and high blood sugar. The findings suggest that high blood sugar levels in women have been linked to difficulty with vaginal lubrication. According to Ann Albright, President of the American Diabetes Association, "The lubrication issues not only can impact sensation, they also can make sex very uncomfortable, even painful." In a 1986 study on women with diabetes, nearly half reported having a sexual problem; 32% reported problems with vaginal lubrication; and 89% reported that their problems started after their diabetes diagnosis.

It should be no surprise that as we see growing numbers of men and women in our country struggling with obesity, diabetes, and high cholesterol; we're seeing a similar trend of men and women reporting difficulty with low sex desire and problems with sexual functioning.

Exercise

Lack of regular exercise is problematic for a number of obvious reasons. Obesity and/or being significantly overweight can lead to diabetes, high cholesterol, and high blood pressure—all of which could contribute physiologic causes for low sexual libido. Not only does regular exercise increase blood flow to all of the bodies vital organs, it also helps us keep our hormones balanced, improves body image, and with proper stretching—improves flexibility (always a bonus in the bedroom). Exercise also aids in reducing body fat and increasing our overall health. A healthier body promotes a healthier sex drive. It's that simple.

Medications

There are numerous medications that may cause difficulty with sexual responding and sexual functioning. If you're taking a medication, talk to your doctor if you are experiencing any negative side effects, including: erectile dysfunction, low sexual desire, inability to orgasm, vaginal dryness, or loss of genital sensitivity. Below is a very brief list of medications known to cause sexual side effects:

- Antidepressants
- Antipsychotics
- Antianxiety medications, including benzodiazepines
- Diuretics and high blood pressure medications
- High cholesterol medications (statins and fibrates)
- Cardiovascular medications
- Thyroid medications
- Muscle relaxants
- H2 Blockers
- Anticonvulsants
- Medications to treat prostate cancer

Do not stop taking a medication without consulting with your prescribing physician. They may be able to change your prescription or decrease your dose of medication, depending on your health and overall symptoms. Talk to your doctor about what options might be best for you.

Psychological Causes

If someone has been having difficulty with low sexual desire, the first thing I recommend is that they see their medical doctor to rule out any possible medical condition. Along with a physical exam, the doctor generally includes sending the patient for bloodwork, to see if there is an imbalance in their sex hormones. For males, this includes a blood test for Total and Free Testosterone. For females, the blood test should include: Follicle Stimulating Hormone (FSH), Luteinizing Hormone (LH), Estradiol, Progesterone, Free Testosterone, and DHEA-S. Testosterone levels are highest in the morning and blood tests should be done after a period of fasting.

Once all medical issues have been ruled out, it is fairly safe to say that the problem is either relational (we'll get to that) or psychological. Below is a brief list of psychological causes for low sexual desire:

- Mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, and Bipolar Disorder
- Poor body image
- Body dysmorphic disorder
- Low self-esteem
- History of sexual trauma, including childhood sexual abuse, sexual assault, and/or rape
- History of negative or un-pleasurable sexual experiences
- Chronic stress

Of all of the aforementioned issues, chronic stress in daily living may be the most common. This includes stress at home and at work—being overworked, being a “workaholic,” hating your job and/or your boss. Moreover, one may be suffering from high levels of stress due to financial concerns, grief & loss, and major life changes. Stress increases the body's production of the hormone cortisol. Increased levels of cortisol prevent your body from producing sufficient amounts of Testosterone (which as you now know is an essential hormone for our sexual libido). To combat this, one has to learn daily self-care for stress management, such as: proper nutrition; adequate sleep; exercise; relaxation techniques; setting and maintaining healthy boundaries personally and professionally; and creating a healthy support system, which may include a therapist or counselor.

Relationship Issues

When couples come to see me for therapy because one of the partners is struggling with low sexual desire, the first thing we do is address the possibility of one or more of the aforementioned five causes. However, even in cases where it may be a lack of sleep, poor diet, exercise, medication, or mental health issue—that person may be able to resolve that issue, and there is still a problem with their sexual desire. Conversely, I may have a couple where one of the partners struggles with low sexual desire and they do not have any issues in any of the other aforementioned areas. In both scenarios, it ultimately leaves us with only one likely cause: their relationship.

Let me begin by saying that I believe low sexual desire or low libido is a “problem” only if the person experiencing it feels that it is a problem. In some cases, there is simply a difference in each partner's libido level—one being high and the other's being moderate or low. For these couples, I help the person with the naturally lower libido find comfortable ways to meet the needs of the person with the higher libido; through other means of sexual interaction, not including sexual intercourse.

For couples that are struggling with a partner having low sexual desire, and who is unhappy and would like it to improve, we begin to address the possibility that there are some relationship issues which may be affecting their desire for their partner. The most widespread problem for many of the couples I treat in these circumstances is poor communication. This may be an inability to communicate one's sexual thoughts and feelings. Or it may be that there are unresolved conflicts, resentments, criticisms or complaints that are not being communicated properly and/or worked through effectively.

If your partner is feeling resentful toward you or is feeling unappreciated in the relationship, it will almost inevitably show up in the bedroom. It can be very difficult (if not impossible) to feel sexual desire for someone, when you are struggling with negative feelings towards them from unresolved relationship issues. In these cases, much of the work in the beginning of therapy is learning communication skills to work through the resentments and unresolved conflicts. Other relationship problems that tend to lead to a lack of sexual desire are: feeling disconnected from the other due to lack of quality time spent together; feeling unappreciated; and/or feeling that there is not enough regular daily (non-sexual) affection. In addition, there are more complicated issues, such as: feeling regularly disrespected or degraded; broken trust; and infidelity. If the problem is likely due to one of the latter issues, I highly suggest seeking out the help of a psychosexual therapist.

A final note...

It's important that we as individuals decide if we're happy with our own level of sexual desire. This cannot be determined by what we think we *should* be feeling based on perceived societal norms. Of course, sexual libido waxes and wanes in all relationships over time, and that should also be considered. However, if you're happy having sex once per week, or once per month or once per year, and feel that your needs are being met, and you're happy in your relationship with yourself or with a partner—there is no need to label yourself as “dysfunctional.” If you've consulted with a doctor to be sure your hormone levels are within normal limits, you're healthy both physically and mentally, and you feel you have a happy, healthy relationship; perhaps it's time for you and your partner to explore more creative means to meet their higher level of sexual libido. For additional help navigating this choice, I recommend reading: *When Your Sex Drives Don't Match: Discover Your Libido Types to Create a Mutually Satisfying Sex Life*; or *Perfectly Normal: Living and Loving with Low Libido*, both written by Sandra Pertot.

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