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The health benefits of sex toys

The global sex toy industry is worth more than \$15 billion a year and research suggests that almost half the British population admit to owning at least one product. We go beyond the pleasure principle to examine the health benefits of sex toys.

How many people use sex toys?

The sex toy industry is abuzz with 'good vibrations' and the purchase and use of sex toys is becoming ever more mainstream. [Studies conducted at Indiana University](#) in the USA found that 53% of women and 45% of men aged between 18–65 years had used a vibrator, and that vibrator use is associated with improved sexual function and being more proactive about sexual health. As well as offering pleasure and fun, sex toys can be a useful adjunct to medical treatment.

Health benefits of sex toys for women

Former nurse Samantha Evans is co-founder and managing director of sex toy company [Jo Divine](#). She says an increasing number of customers are looking for sex toys to help with specific health conditions:

"Sex toys can be helpful in the treatment of menopausal symptoms such as [vaginal atrophy](#); [vulval/vaginal pain](#) and tightness (due to vaginismus, vulvodynia, lichen sclerosus, gynae cancer treatments and surgical interventions; neurological conditions such as multiple sclerosis; lack of arousal, and [low libido](#)."

Some medications can also impact upon sexual function and pleasure in both men and women, including cancer treatments, antidepressants, antihistamines, and blood pressure and heart medicines.

Dr Stephanie de Giorgio, a GP with a special interest in women's health, recommends the use of sex toys for certain health issues.

"One unexpected benefit of sex toy use, seen in a study of menopausal women, was an improvement in sleep and overnight menopausal sweating", she says. "There is also some evidence that the use of slim internal vibrators with plenty of good-quality vaginal lubricant can help to increase blood flow to the vaginal area, improving the symptoms of some vaginal conditions. Some research suggests that women prefer to use slim vaginal vibrators rather than the more clinical dilators that are often prescribed. This can complement other treatments that may be recommended, such as local anaesthetic gels, medication and psychological therapies."

Vibrators can create different types of sexual stimulation, which can be beneficial when there is decreased sexual sensation, low libido or an inability to [enjoy orgasm](#).

"Using a slim vibrator can help to stretch the tissues of the vagina to enable penetration without pain and the vibrations increase blood flow to the walls of the vagina, promoting healing, stimulating nerves and improving lubrication," adds Evans.

Health benefits of sex toys for men

There are a number of sexual problems in men that may be helped by using specific sex toys. These include [erectile dysfunction](#), [premature ejaculation](#), lack of libido and post-surgical problems for a variety of conditions.

"Constriction rings can help a man maintain his erection for longer, making it firmer, and also delay ejaculation," explains Evans. "Specially designed male vibrators can help men to gain an erection and stimulate nerve endings. They can also help with delayed ejaculation as they offer a different sexual sensation to manual masturbation."

de Giorgio agrees that these vibrators can be useful in treating male sexual dysfunction, and adds:

"Penile suction devices to help get erections are available to purchase as well as on prescription, but it would be best to get medical advice before use. One [research paper](#) has looked at the use of penile sleeves and penile prostheses (more usually termed 'strap-ons' and used by women) as unconventional ways of allowing men to continue to have penetrative intercourse with a partner if they cannot get a useful erection, with some success."

Surprising health benefits of sex toys

"Using sex toys to enhance sexual pleasure and orgasm can help you to sleep, boost immunity, relieve pain, reduce stress and boost your brain power," comments Evans. "And age is not a barrier. One lady told us she enjoyed her first orgasm at 70 using a sex toy. They have few side-effects, unlike medication, and can help many women enjoy clitoral orgasms and G-spot orgasms, something they may not have achieved before. Sex toys can also help people continue to enjoy sexual intimacy and pleasure when penetrative sex is not possible."

For both men and women, sex toys for couples can open up a dialogue about sex and what they enjoy as individuals and together.

"It may be something that they haven't tried before due to embarrassment or fear of purchasing items, but expert advice is available," says de Giorgio, "and they may find that their sex lives benefit from this new openness."

Should GPs prescribe sex toys on the NHS?

"I work with many who recommend them," says Evans. "Sex toys are being recognised as valuable 'tools' to supplement conventional medical treatment. Many healthcare providers (HCPs) are striving to normalise sex for their patients, rather than medicalise it. We've created a health brochure in association with HCPs that many give out to their patients."

However, we still have a long way to go before recommending sex toys becomes the norm for all HCPs and many struggle to talk about sex to their patients.

"I think it is unlikely that sex toys will be made available on prescription for men or women," adds de Giorgio, "as medical devices have to be regulated. What would be very beneficial though would be having HCPs opening up discussions about sexual problems during medical consultations and allowing people to talk about their difficulties, without embarrassment."

How to choose the right sex toy

When choosing a sex toy, Evans recommends 'skin-safe' products made from silicone, toughened glass, metal or ABS plastic, as some are made from materials that may be detrimental to sexual health.

"Jelly and rubber are both porous, therefore difficult to clean, and they degrade over time, so avoid those and latex. Also invest in a pH-balanced lubricant," she says. "Customers sometimes buy inappropriate products to resolve their issue, which they are unable to use, so I always advise people to call us to find out which sex toy would be suitable; what you need is totally dependent upon your health condition."

If you have a health issue that is affecting your sexual well-being, visit your GP in the first instance. Your local sexual health clinic may also be able to offer advice and, if appropriate, psychosexual counsellors and relationship therapists can also provide support.

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