

CHAPTER 26

Increasing Performance

Since the beginning of history and possibly before, men and women have spent much time looking for things that would increase sexual desire in themselves or their partners or would-be partners.

The ancient Greeks believed in lentils. The old Roman, Pliny the Elder, advocated drinking goat's milk in which mallow root had been steeped. Garlic, prunes, artichokes, oysters and truffles have all been credited with enhancing desire and sexual performance. The *Kama Sutra* lists several brews - including garlic root with white pepper and licorice drunk with sugared milk; ram's or he-goat's testicles boiled in sugared milk; sweet potato roots crushed and boiled in milk - supposed to enhance virility. There is no evidence that any of these affect anything except the imagination.

Ginseng has been around for thousands of years. First used as a supposed sexual stimulant in ancient India, it is still considered a remedy for all kinds of sexual inadequacy in contemporary oriental medicine. However, a recent study of users in the United States found that only seven percent felt it enhanced sexual performance - about what you'd expect from a placebo. Nonetheless, many did report a general feeling of well-being, reduced fatigue and stimulation, so don't throw away those expensive ginseng tablets; they may do you some good (though they can also do funny things to your hormones and disrupt the menstrual cycle).

Many Asians prize rhinoceros horn as an aphrodisiac. It seems to be a very expensive placebo, whose use is founded in sympathetic magic (eating a big horn like that is bound to give you a big horn).

As long ago as the seventeenth century, chocolate was considered an aphrodisiac in France. They just might have had something. Professor Diane Bunce of Catholic University of America reports that chocolate contains pheylethylamine, which acts as a natural mood-changing neurotransmitter in the brain. She claims that high levels of this substance in the body may lead to a 'high' feeling similar to that of being romantically in love.

Maybe the old Greeks also had something. Lentils, as well as such high protein foods as meat and eggs, contain an amino acid, phenylalanine, which can be used in the body to make phenylethylamine.

Phenylalanine and another related amino acid, tyrosine, are also converted into the neurotransmitters, norepinephrine and dopamine. These are thought to be involved in regulating the release of an aphrodisiac hormone, leutinising hormone releasing hormone, by a part of the brain. Parachlorophenylalanine and leutinising hormone releasing hormone have been shown experimentally to increase sexual desire, the latter especially when combined with oestrogen in women and testosterone in men.

Another amino acid, tryptophane, has also been noted to cause increased sexual desire but has been banned from sale by the FDA.

A drug called levodopa, used for treating Parkinson's disease, has a much more powerful effect in increasing dopamine. It can have a definite aphrodisiac effect in Parkinson's disease patients; some old fellows have been known to experience wet dreams for the first time in many years. These effects are not reliably reproduced in 'normal' people, and the drug can have some nasty side effects.

Another drug, bromocryptine, also used for treating Parkinson's disease (among other things) has a similar, but probably weaker, effect.

Apomorphine hydrochloride has also been shown experimentally to increase sexual desire.

Acetylcholine is another neurotransmitter involved in sex, and it has been claimed that taking choline or lecithin can increase the production of acetylcholine in the body and act as an aphrodisiac; there is little, if any, evidence for this.

Maybe it's safer to give her chocolates. Then again, as Dorothy Parker once said, 'Candy's dandy but liquor's quicker'.

Many of us have had the experience of being under the influence of alcohol, having sex with someone, or in some place, or at some time, we definitely wouldn't have had if sober. So, mainly because it reduces anxiety and inhibitions, alcohol is an aphrodisiac. Unfortunately, as Shakespeare said in *Macbeth*, it increases the desire but diminishes the ability.

Excessive use of alcohol certainly kills sex. Up to eighty percent of male heavy drinkers experience impotence or loss of sexual desire. In women, alcoholism is linked to difficulty in becoming sexually aroused and in achieving orgasm.

One way in which alcohol decreases sexual desire and performance is by decreasing production of the male hormone, testosterone, and increasing production of female oestrogen hormones. Testosterone is the most reliable aphrodisiac - but only in men who are low in it or in women. Unfortunately, extra testosterone can actually decrease sex drive in normal guys, and women who use it can end up with beards, Paul Robson voices and clits like dicks.

Another hormone, oxytocin, has been found to cause both males and females using it (as a nasal spray) to become very sexually aroused. Alcohol inhibits oxytocin release; so do opiates. Excessive exercise releases endorphins, natural opiates produced in the body, and acts likewise.

Smoking tobacco has been considered sexy, but this is a false impression largely promulgated by tobacco companies and their advertisers. Nicotine constricts blood vessels, making erection more difficult, and does nothing for sex.

In small amounts, marijuana and cocaine may make users feel good and can make them more open to their sexual feelings and more interested in sex. Marijuana has often been touted as intensifying the sexual act through sensory enhancement, prolongation of time sense, increased fantasy imagery and a decrease in inhibition. However, as with alcohol, the effect depends a lot on the individual and the setting. In excess, these drugs tend to cause users to lose interest in sex - and most other things. Daily marijuana users have been found to have intercourse 80 percent less often than control groups and to experience orgasm during intercourse 40 percent less often. Female users also have shorter and more irregular menstrual cycles.

All the other 'recreational' drugs first kill sex and then the user. Methaqualone is less detrimental to sex than most in the short run, but equally destructive in the long run.

Perhaps the most famous supposedly aphrodisiac drug is 'Spanish fly'. This has been used as a sexual stimulant since before Antony and Cleopatra made merry on the Nile. It is an extremely irritating substance that causes inflammation of the urinary tract, which may result in erection or engorgement of the clitoris. It is a powerful poison that can cause vomiting, diarrhoea, shock, extensive tissue destruction and even death. Mail order 'potency pills' tend to include milder urethral irritants that act similarly but much less powerfully.

Yohimbine is a drug which enhances the release of noradrenalin and produces peripheral sympathetic nerve blocking. It has been used for some years to treat psychogenic impotence in men. There have been a number of conflicting reports on its usefulness, which must still be considered unproven. It can sometimes cause nausea, dizziness or nervousness.

Papaverine, with or without phentolamine, dilates the blood vessels of the penis, allowing increased blood flow to the erectile tissues. Unfortunately, it is only useful when injected directly into the penis. Fibrosis and bruising of the penis at the injection site can occur. Another serious risk of its use is priapism - an abnormal erection of long duration that can result in complete impotence. Low blood pressure on rising is another possible side effect.

Prostaglandin E acts similarly and has fewer side effects but costs three times as much.

Vasoactive intestinal peptide is an amino acid group that triggers nerve transmitters to increase blood flow to the penis and has been used similarly. It also produces vaginal wetness in women, and Senetek, a small California biotech company, has been testing synthetic preparations of this substance in an attempt to produce a super sexual lubricant.

Nitrates and nitrites (especially amyl nitrate and isobutyl nitrate 'poppers') have been used

to enhance orgasm and can have some aphrodisiac effect (intensified orgasm and heightened awareness during sex) by increasing blood supply (they break down into nitrous oxide, one link in a chain of events that relaxes the blood vessels in the penis, increasing the blood flow and resulting in an erection). They can also cause a racing heart and/or blinding headache and/or nausea and/or dizziness, that will promptly make sex the least of your concerns. In excess dosage or in a sensitive individual, they can cause a heart attack.

Nitroglycerin, which acts similarly, can be either injected directly into the penis or applied topically as a 2% cream to increase local blood flow.

And now there is Viagra, which enhances the release of nitrous oxide. It is great for treating impotence but is not an aphrodisiac; it won't improve the sex drive or spice up the sex life of a man who can already achieve an erection. And, like all the drugs involving nitrous oxide, it won't give you an erection unless you become sexually excited. It can cause headache, facial and chest flushing, indigestion, nasal congestion, urinary tract infection, abnormal vision, diarrhoea, dizziness and a rash. It can also cause a precipitous drop in blood pressure, resulting in death in some cases, in men also using nitrates, nitrites or nitroglycerin, and perhaps in others.

Orgasm involves the release of histamine, responsible for the flush one may get at this time. Niacin promotes histamine release and can, maybe, have some sex-enhancing effects. It's safer, though, to eat plenty of meats and cheese, which will supply histidine that the body can convert to histamine. Red wines also contain some histamine.

Back to safer medicines - what about vitamins and such nutritional supplements? Unless you're severely deficient, it's extremely unlikely these will have any effect. Zinc is one element that affects not only fertility but also smell and taste; maybe deficiency could adversely affect sex and dosing up on it (e.g., with oysters, a good source) could increase the drive of someone whose stores were depleted. Vitamin E is an alleged aphrodisiac but there is no scientific evidence to back this claim.

A study by Dr Alan Hirsch of the Smell and Taste Treatment and Research Foundation in Chicago claims that the homey odours of pies, doughnuts, licorice and lavender are powerful male turn-ons.

Henry Kissinger is credited with saying that 'power is the ultimate aphrodisiac'. To an extent, he's right; people who feel potent are likely to be sexually potent. Conversely, those who feel powerless are quite likely to be sexually impotent. Modern researches have documented changes in sexual behaviour accompanied by changes in actual brain structure and organisation in some male fish when they change from a position of dominance to subordination or vice versa, and it is becoming increasingly likely that the same process occurs in other animals, including man. On the other hand, females seem to be driven largely by their own internal rhythms.

War is an even more potent aphrodisiac. The excitement and fear produced cause a profound general arousal that, combined with a biological urge to procreate to replace real or potential losses, invariably result in a rampant promiscuity.

Perhaps love is the best aphrodisiac. It may seem easier to reach for some drug or other, but sex based on mutual love is bound to be ultimately more rewarding. And don't underestimate the power of a little romance.

As any true lover can testify, sex can be pretty vigorous exercise. It's no coincidence that the most common vulgar expression for exhaustion is 'I feel fucked'. Sex involves strong, vigorous movements. It can also give heart and lungs a pretty good work-out.

But if sex can be enjoyable and effective exercise, it also requires a degree of fitness for its enjoyment. If your back gives in or you run out of puff halfway through, neither you nor your partner are going to get the most out of sex.

So, the first thing you need is exercises that develop and maintain strength and flexibility, especially abdominal strength and back flexibility. Moves that condition hips and thighs are also particularly useful.

Beyond this, a number of recent studies have indicated that aerobic exercise like running,

swimming, cycling, aerobics and strenuous walking can improve the quantity and quality of sexual activity. Between a third and three quarters of the people in these studies recorded doing it between sixteen and thirty percent more often after three to nine months on an exercise programme.

More importantly, perhaps, most of these reported a greater enjoyment of sex. Women were more easily aroused, their climaxes came faster and were more intense. Men had more satisfying foreplay, with increased caressing and deep kissing, and their orgasms increased both in quantity and quality.

There are a number of ways in which aerobic exercise can benefit sex, besides the general ones of increasing fitness and stamina, reducing stress and improving self-image.

Firstly, it increases the blood supply to the genitals as well as everywhere else, which enables penis and clitoris to reach their fullest erection and increases the sensitivity of vulva and vagina.

Also, 15-25 minutes of such torture as running can release endorphins, the so-called 'happy hormones', which can give you a high for up to three hours later.

However, be warned. Though 15-45 minutes of strenuous exercise produces an increase in blood levels of testosterone, much more than this can actually decrease them. This is probably why doing more than 45 minutes moderate exercise a day three times a week does not produce any additional enhancement of sexuality. In fact, do more than 18 hours a week and your sex drive is likely to go down.

There is a further hazard to bicycling (whether moving or stationary): sustained pressure on the perineum by a hard, narrow seat can squeeze off the blood flow to the penis, causing numbness, and compress the pudendal nerves, causing impotence.

Exercise can lessen monthly flow and menstrual discomfort. Carried to excess, it can actually prevent menstruation. That might seem like a bonus, but the reason it occurs is that the woman has lost so much fat that she cannot produce sufficient oestrogen to bring about ovulation. Unfortunately, the amount of oestrogen produced is also insufficient for her to develop appropriate bone density to avoid injuries to spine, wrists and feet.

It is always advisable to get a thorough physical before starting a diet or exercise programme and to start with moderate exercise you can easily build into your day.

There are several advantages of doing both your aerobic exercise and your callisthenics with your partner, not the least being that you are about ten times less likely to stop your exercise programme. This is probably because of the motivation and support a partner can provide. Both of you are less likely to accept your own or your partner's excuses - a good reason for involving your partner in any efforts to build a healthier lifestyle. Exercising together can also promote companionship and build mutual understanding. Also, there are a number of very useful exercises for shaping, toning, flexibility, alignment and movement that can only be done by couples working together. Working with your partner allows you to stabilise your body better and also to fine tune the resistance of each exercise. These exercises can enhance your sex life not only by increasing your fitness but also by allowing you to become attuned to each other's body in a new way and to reach a deeper level of intimacy. The square stretch and squatting together (with or without rocking or stretching) can be particularly sex enhancing. Touching, stroking, caressing, relaxing together and aligning each other can increase sensuality and improve performance as well as enhancing intimacy.

As with sex, doing it on your own is less satisfying and satisfactory than doing it with a partner, but it can still bring a lot of benefits. As well as some kind of aerobic exercise and the type of exercises mentioned before, conscious breathing, deep breathing, pelvic curls and pelvic rocking are solo exercises that improve sex.

By far the most beneficial exercise you can do to improve your sex life is the Kegel exercises. These strengthen the pubococcygeal muscle, the basic muscle of the pelvic floor that controls the opening and closing of the urethra, seminal canal, vagina and anus. It contracts and

relaxes rhythmically during intercourse and especially during orgasm.

For men, Kegel exercises can cure impotence, improve prostate function, increase pelvic sensation and give a stronger and more pleasurable orgasm. During intercourse, a strong pubococcygeal muscle can not only help him control when he will ejaculate but can also be used to interrupt ejaculation, allowing him to continue intercourse for a considerably longer period. He can also make his dick twitch in the vagina during intercourse, which both partners may enjoy.

Unfortunately, neither they nor any other exercise will increase the dimensions of the penis, since the willy itself is devoid of muscles. You can build up your biceps pumping iron but balancing wet towels on your old fellow won't achieve much.

Kegel exercises have even greater benefits for women than for men. A well-developed pubococcygeal muscle enables the vagina to grip the penis, increasing enjoyment for both partners. Further, a woman can use it to exert a milking and sucking effect guaranteed to bring a tired penis back to life. In addition to this, Kegel exercises can be used to strengthen the pelvic floor in preparation for delivery, to tighten the vaginal opening after childbirth, to reduce pain and swelling from episiotomy, and to help prevent stress incontinence and bladder infections due to incomplete bladder emptying.

To do the exercises, you must first locate the pubococcygeal muscle. This is best done by interrupting the stream a few times, for a few seconds at a time, while you are urinating. The exercises themselves, however, should be done when you have finished voiding or, when you have learnt to do them properly, at any convenient time - sitting in traffic, watching TV, talking on the phone, or whatever suits.

You should start by doing a quick squeeze and relax 5-20 times twice a day at approximately one squeeze per second, exhaling gently as you tighten the muscles around your genitals and anus (not those in your buttocks) and simply letting go when you release (don't bear down). Increase gradually to 25-75 times twice a day. When you can do this, try holding the contraction for three seconds and relaxing three seconds, again starting with 5-20 times twice a day and building up to 25-75 times twice a day. Gradually lengthen the time you hold the contraction up to ten seconds, with ten seconds relaxation between.

When you have reached this stage, instead of merely letting go after the contraction, push down and out gently (without bearing down) as if you were having a bowel motion. When you have mastered this, you are ready for a two month programme of 50-300 a day alternating short and long squeezes combined with the push out motion, after which you should have a well-developed pubococcygeal muscle. You can keep it that way by doing 50-150 repetitions several times a week.

If combining Kegels with the right amount of aerobic exercise and the other exercises suggested earlier doesn't bring you and your partner great sex, you probably need to look at other features of your lifestyle, including diet, drugs, stress and overwork, and non-physical aspects of your relationship.

If you want to increase the frequency of your lovemaking, get yourself in shape, think sexy, dress sexy, write your partner sex letters, create romantic rituals and practise some enlightened self-interest.