

## **Sexual Desirability and Sexual Performance: Does Exercise and Fitness Really Matter?**

Tina M. Penhollow, MS, CHES  
and  
Michael Young, PhD, FAAHB

University of Arkansas  
Program of Health Science  
meyoung(at)uark.edu

### **Introduction**

The physical and psychological benefits of exercise have been documented quite extensively in prior research. Empirical evidence reveals that regular physical activity serves as a protective factor against many chronic diseases, such as cardiovascular diseases, including stroke, coronary artery disease, and hypertension. Physical activity is also important for reducing the risk of osteopenia (reduced bone mass), osteoporosis, and sarcopenia (reduced muscle mass) associated with aging (Wilmore, 2003). Moreover, daily exercise plays an important role in the prevention of two primary metabolic diseases: obesity and diabetes. Exercise has been known to enhance mental health as well. The psychological benefits of exercise include stress relief, mood elevation, increased self-image and self-confidence (Krucoff & Krucoff, 2000). Thus, there are many advantages for those who engage in regular physical activity.

While the association of an active lifestyle with a decreased risk of chronic diseases is well understood, advocates of exercise claim that physical activity may even enhance sexual performance and sexual pleasure (Krucoff & Krucoff, 2000; Stanten & Yeager, 2003). A study by Frauman (1982) found that increased time spent in physical activity was associated with a higher reported frequency of sexual behavior and frequency of desired sexual activity among a population of college undergraduate students. Physical endurance, muscle tone, and body composition all improve sexual functioning (Krucoff & Krucoff, 2000). Additionally, exercise activates the sympathetic nervous system, encouraging blood-flow to the genital region (Stanten & Yeager, 2003). Research shows that even low levels of physical activity tend to elevate mood and help keep "equipment" in better working condition (Krucoff & Krucoff, 2000; Stanten & Yeager, 2003). According to the literature, sedentary men could significantly lower their risk of erectile dysfunction by burning at least 200 calories per day (equal to fast-walking for about 2 miles) (Stanten & Yeager, 2003).

Research indicates that exercise may increase sexual drive, sexual activity, and sexual satisfaction. Results of a recent study reported that women were more sexually responsive following 20 minutes of vigorous exercise (Stanten & Yeager, 2003). Among males, short intense exercise is linked with increased testosterone levels, which may stimulate sexual interest and behavior. Conversely, too much exercise is associated with a decrease in testosterone and other male hormones, which may decrease sexual desire (Krucoff & Krucoff, 2000). Libido in men is dependent both on testosterone levels and on psychological factors (Weiss, 1997). A recent study examined data from 31,742 men ages 53-90 in the Health Professionals Follow-up Study of dentists, optometrists, podiatrists, pharmacists, and veterinarians to check which lifestyle factors affected the risk of erectile dysfunction (Bacon, Mittleman, & Kawachi, 2003). Results of this study found that men over 50 who kept physically active had a 30% lower risk of impotence compared with inactive men.

Furthermore, a Harvard University study of 160 male and female swimmers in their 40s and 60s showed a positive relationship between regular physical activity and the frequency and enjoyment of sexual intercourse. Results stated swimmers in their 60s reported sex lives comparable to people in the general population in their 40s (Krucoff & Krucoff, 2000). Bortz & Wallace (1999) found a high level of sexual activity and satisfaction to be correlated with degree of fitness in both older men and women. A regular exercise program combined with regular sexual activity may be supportive elements for successful aging.

There has been extensive interest focused on the relationship between physical exercise and a variety of aspects of human functioning. Regular physical activity enhances health and improves overall appearance, both of which can boost aspects of sexuality. There is

limited research on the topic of fitness and its relationship with individual dimensions of sexuality. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the relationship of exercise frequency and self-reported fitness levels on perceived sexual desirability and sexual performance.

## Methods

### Participants

Data were collected from a convenience sample of undergraduate students ( $n = 408$ ) enrolled in health science courses at a southeastern university. Participation in the study was voluntary and all subjects remained anonymous. Participants voluntarily completed a 130-item cross-sectional questionnaire during normal scheduled class times. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted prior to the implementation of the study.

### Testing Instrument

A questionnaire was used in the study that included measures related to a number of different health issues. Demographic variables collected information regarding age, gender, ethnicity, and class rank. For the purpose of this study, four questions focused specifically on (1) exercise frequency, (2) perceived fitness, (3) perceptions of sexual desirability, and (4) sexual performance. Data concerning exercise frequency were organized into four categories ranging from less than 1 day/week to 6 or 7 days/week. Data for the other three questions were placed in five categories ranging from much above average to much below average. Due to extremely low numbers in the “much below average” category, these subjects were grouped with “below average” for the fitness variable. For the sexuality questions “much below average” and “below average” were grouped with “about average.”

### Data Analysis

Researchers utilized SAS programs to complete the data analysis. Descriptive analyses and basic frequency counts were run on the data. Data were analyzed using chi-square. Analyses were conducted by gender.

## Results

Results of the data from the present study are presented below in various forms. The majority of the survey participants were female (71% vs. 29%, respectively). Relative to class rank, juniors were the largest group of respondents (32%), with sophomores (27%) and seniors (24%) being the second and third largest groups. Freshman comprised the smallest group of participants (17%). The majority of participants were Caucasian (84%), while African Americans accounted for 11 percent. The remaining 5 percent included Asian, American Indian, Pacific Islander, and other ethnicities.

For males, fitness levels significantly improved perception of sexual performance ( $p < .001$ ), and sexual desirability ( $p < .002$ ). Exercise frequency significantly enhanced perception of sexual desirability ( $p < .01$ ) only. No significant results were found with regard to exercise frequency and sexual performance for males ([Table 1](#)). Over 90% of males who reported their fitness level as much above average rated their sexual performance and sexual desirability as above average or much above average. All males who exercised 6 or 7 days per week reported their sexual desirability as above average or much above average.

Among females, self-reported fitness levels significantly improved sexual desirability ( $p < .001$ ). No significant results were found with regard to fitness levels and sexual performance. Additionally among females, exercise frequency did not impact perception of sexual desirability or sexual performance ([Table 2](#)). Seventy-one percent of females who reported their fitness level as much above average, rated their sexual desirability as above average or much above average.

Significant gender differences were noted with regard to sexual desirability and sexual performance by exercise frequency ([Table 3](#)). Among those who exercised 2 to 3 days per week, over 80% males and nearly 60% of females rated themselves as above average or much above average in sexual desirability ( $p < .04$ ). For those who exercised 4 to 5 days per week, over 65% of males thought they were above average or much above average with regard to sexual desirability; however, nearly 60% of females reported themselves as about average ( $p < .04$ ). For sexual performance, among those who exercised 4 to 5 days per week, 88% of females and 69% of males reported themselves as above average or much above average on sexual performance ( $p < .002$ ). All males who exercised 6 to 7 days per week rated their sexual desirability as above average or much above average, as compared with 63% of females ( $p < .02$ ).

Significant gender differences were found for sexual desirability and sexual performance by fitness level ([Table 4](#)). For those who

reported their fitness level as above average, 80% of females and 47% of males reported their sexual performance as above average or much above average ( $p < .002$ ). For participants with a below average reported fitness level, 60% of males, but only 30% of females, reported their sexual desirability to be above average or much above average ( $p < .05$ ).

## Discussion

Sexuality and exercise have been frequent topics of empirical study; however, there is a paucity of research that relates exercise and fitness with sexual performance or sexual desire. Based on the results of this study, longer exercise frequency and higher levels of physical fitness improved perception of sexual performance and sexual desirability. The literature indicates that regular exercise is a protective factor against many chronic diseases and illnesses. Furthermore, research has convincingly demonstrated that regular physical activity provides benefits to psychological well-being. This study supports the notion that exercise may go beyond its traditional role as a protective factor and enhance individuals' sexual self-esteem.

Body image has been broadly defined in the literature as a conception that an individual has of his or her own body. A person's body image is constructed during one's lifetime through interactions with processes taking place within one's own body and the outside world (Haavio-Mannila & Purhonen, 2001). The key element of body image is outer appearance. In addition to physical conditions, the values and norms of society are also important in producing body image. In modern society the body is considered to be a representation of oneself, and thus appearance allows for individual social meaning, such as young or old, ugly or beautiful (Haavio-Mannila & Purhonen, 2001). The concepts of body image and sexual attractiveness have been shown to be closely linked together. The literature suggests that looking "good" means mostly the same as looking sexually attractive (Haavio-Mannila & Purhonen, 2001; Turner, 1994, 1996).

According to Bordo (1993) taking care of one's physical appearance and the constant cultivating of one's body has become an important moral issue. In society, slenderness is considered to be an indicator of beauty, good health, self-discipline, and sexual attractiveness. A youthful slim, firm, and muscular body symbolizes self-control and will power, while an overweight or aging body is stigmatized (Haavio-Mannila & Purhonen, 2001). For example, a recent study by Russell & Cox (2003) indicated that BMI by itself was a significant predictor of body dissatisfaction among females. Wiederman and Hurst (1998) found a negative relationship between high BMI and sexual experience among U.S. college women. Conclusions drawn from their study suggest a lack of interest by potential partners.

## Conclusion

Exercise frequency and physical fitness enhance attractiveness and increase energy levels, both of which make people feel better about themselves. Those who exercise are more likely to experience a greater level of satisfaction and a positive perception of self. Moreover, those who feel better about themselves may perceive they are more sexually desirable and may perform better sexually. The majority of individuals who are regularly physically active are healthier, and perhaps healthier individuals may be more willing and able to have sex.

From youth into advanced age, sexuality continues to be a key quality of life issue. Research has indicated a decline in both sexual performance and satisfaction with aging; regular physical activity may be one way to modify this decline. Further research is needed to identify additional physiological or psychological correlates of the relationship between exercise and sexuality. Maintaining a healthy active lifestyle is critical to sustaining multiple dimensions of health and well being.

## References

- Bacon, C. G., Mittleman, M. A., & Kawachi, I. (2003). Sexual function in men older than 50 years of age: Results from the health professionals follow-up study. *Annals of Internal Medicine*, *139*, 161-168.
- Bordo, S. (1993). *Unbearable weight: Feminism, western culture and the body*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Bortz, W. M. 2nd, & Wallace, D. H. (1999). Physical fitness, aging, and sexuality. *Western Journal of Medicine*, *170*, 167-175.
- Frauman, D. C. (1982). The relationship between physical exercise, sexual activity, and desire for sexually activity. *The Journal of*

Haavio-Mannila, E., & Purhonen, S. (2001). Slimness and self-rated sexual attractiveness: Comparisons of men and women in two cultures. *Journal of Sex Research*, 38, 102-111.

Krucoff, C., & Krucoff, M. (2000). Peak performance. *American Fitness*, 19, 32-36.

Russell, W. R., & Cox, R. H. (2003). Social physique anxiety, body dissatisfaction and self-esteem in college females of differing exercise frequency, perceived weight discrepancy, and race. *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 26, 298-319.

Stanten, N., & Yeager, S. (2003). Four workouts to improve your love life. *Prevention*, 55, 76-78.

Turner, B. S. (1994). Preface. In P. Falk, *The consuming body* (pp. vii-xvii). London: Sage.

Turner, B. S. (1996). *The body and society. Explorations in social theory* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.

Weiss, J. (1997). Not tonight honey, I've got a bodyache. *Women's Sports and Fitness*, 19, 66-68.

Wiederman, M. W., & Hurst, S. R. (1998). Body size, physical attractiveness, and body image among young adult women: Relationships to sexual experience and sexual esteem. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 35, 272-281.

Wilmore, J. H. (2003). Aerobic exercise and endurance. *Physician and Sports Medicine*, 31, 45-51.

[Return to Front page](#)