

The role of physical therapy in women's sexual health

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Optimal sexual health depends on a variety of interplaying factors including psychological well-being, partner relationship, cultural and personal beliefs, and external stressors. Sexual functioning is also influenced by medical history, illness, and various medications such that hormonal, circulatory, muscular and nervous systems are significant components as well.

On a purely mechanical level, engaging in comfortable and enjoyable sexual activity requires the ability to feel, touch, and move. Physical disability, orthopedic injury, neurological impairments or the presence of pain are all conditions that potentially affect sexual function. More specifically, disorders of the pelvic floor, common to nearly 33% of premenopausal women and up to 45% of postmenopausal women, have a significantly negative impact on sexual function.

The multi-factorial nature of sexual function is reflected by the fact that various types of professionals are involved in the promotion of sexual health and wellness. Most commonly recognized professions associated with sexual health include mental health professionals such as psychologists and sex therapists, and physicians, specifically urologists, gynecologists and psychiatrists, though

growing interest in sexual medicine amongst family doctors is growing. Only recently, however, has the profession of physical therapy begun to be linked with sexual health.

Physical therapists are trained to provide treatment to restore function, facilitate movement and relieve pain. In this capacity physical therapists are well equipped to provide specific treatment and instruction to assist women in the improvement of sexual function, particularly in the face of disability, weakness or pain. More specifically, physical therapists trained in pelvic floor rehabilitation and manual therapy, are in the unique position to provide pelvic floor rehabilitation when pelvic floor dysfunction, a significant contributor to sexual dysfunction, is present.

Physical therapists are active in promoting sexual health, through the treatment of specific conditions relating to the pelvic floor. The pelvic floor is comprised of muscle and connective tissue, and attaches from the bone of the pubis in front to the bone of the coccyx in back, so that it is situated as a bowl-like structure right underneath the pelvic organs and surrounding the genitalia. Pelvic floor muscles are weakened by factors such as pregnancy, childbirth, chronic coughing or constipation, or even an occupation that has involved prolonged standing, heavy lifting, or straining. Weak pelvic floor muscles contribute to conditions such as organ prolapse, and urinary and anal incontinence, conditions that have been

linked with sexual dysfunction. In at least two studies, pelvic floor strengthening has been correlated with improved sexual function.

Another area in which pelvic floor rehabilitation and manual therapy are effective is in the treatment of sexual pain disorders. Painful intercourse has been correlated with increased tension in the muscles of the pelvic floor, contributing to pain and friction upon attempted intercourse. Physical therapy techniques, such as manual therapy to stretch and release tight muscles and connective tissue, along with learning to relax the vaginal muscles, are some of the tools that physical therapists use in the treatment of conditions such as vaginismus, and vulvar vestibulitis syndrome.

Additional tools used by pelvic floor physical therapists include pelvic floor biofeedback and electrical stimulation. Biofeedback is a treatment tool that relies on visual feedback displayed on a computer screen, which records the muscle activity of the pelvic floor, which is picked up through a sensor inserted in the vagina. With this feedback, women learn both how to relax and how to effectively contract, their pelvic floor muscles. Electrical stimulation is also provided through a vaginal sensor and can be delivered for various objectives, including increasing blood flow, strengthening, muscle education, or decreasing urinary urgency and frequency.

Other areas in which physical therapists may be utilized in women's sexual health is post urogynecological surgery, which may result in dyspareunia and decreased sexual function in all areas. Physical therapy which includes pelvic floor exercise and manual therapy, with its resultant improvement in pelvic blood flow and tissue mobility, are potentially effective in improving genital arousal, and orgasm. These are potential areas of intervention and additional research is needed to substantiate these theories.

To find a pelvic floor physical therapist in your area:

USA: Contact the regional representative of the Womens Health Section of the APTA (American Physical Therapy Association)

<http://www.womenshealthapta.org/regions.cfm>

International: Contact a regional delegate from the IOPTWH (International Organization of Physical Therapists in Women's Health)

<http://www.ioptwh.org/members/members.html>

