

# FEATURES

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Concern about the safety of hormone replacement has all but obscured one of the most pressing concerns for women of a certain age: the effects of menopause on their sex lives. Many are reluctant to ask their doctors a question uppermost in their minds: "What has happened to my desire for sex and my ability to enjoy it?"

With fully a third of their lives ahead of them, but with little or none of the hormones that fostered what may have been a robust sex life, many postmenopausal women experience diminished or absent sexual desire, difficulty becoming aroused or achieving orgasm, or pain during intercourse caused by menopause-related vaginal changes.

Sometimes the reasons for these problems go beyond hormones. Some women may consider themselves less sexually attractive as their bodies change with age, or they have partners who have lost interest in sex or the ability to perform reliably.

But for most postmenopausal women, hormone-related changes are the primary factors that interfere with sexual satisfaction. My friend Linda, for example, who lives in Pittsburgh, was 52 years old and recently married when her vibrant interest in sex suddenly plummeted, leading to a search for a way to restore it.

A more common situation is described by Pat Wingart and Barbara Kantowitz in their informative book, *Is It Hot in Here or Is It Me?* (Workman, 2006): "You're not in the mood a lot of the time. Most nights, you just wish your partner would roll over and go to sleep. When you do feel like a little action, it takes forever to get warmed up. Sometimes sex is more painful than pleasurable."

## COMMON CHANGES

Unlike Linda, who had an abrupt change in desire, many women report a gradual decline in sexual desire as they age. In a survey of 580 menopausal women conducted by SIECUS, the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, 45 percent reported a decrease in sexual desire after menopause, 37 percent reported no change and 10 percent reported an increase.

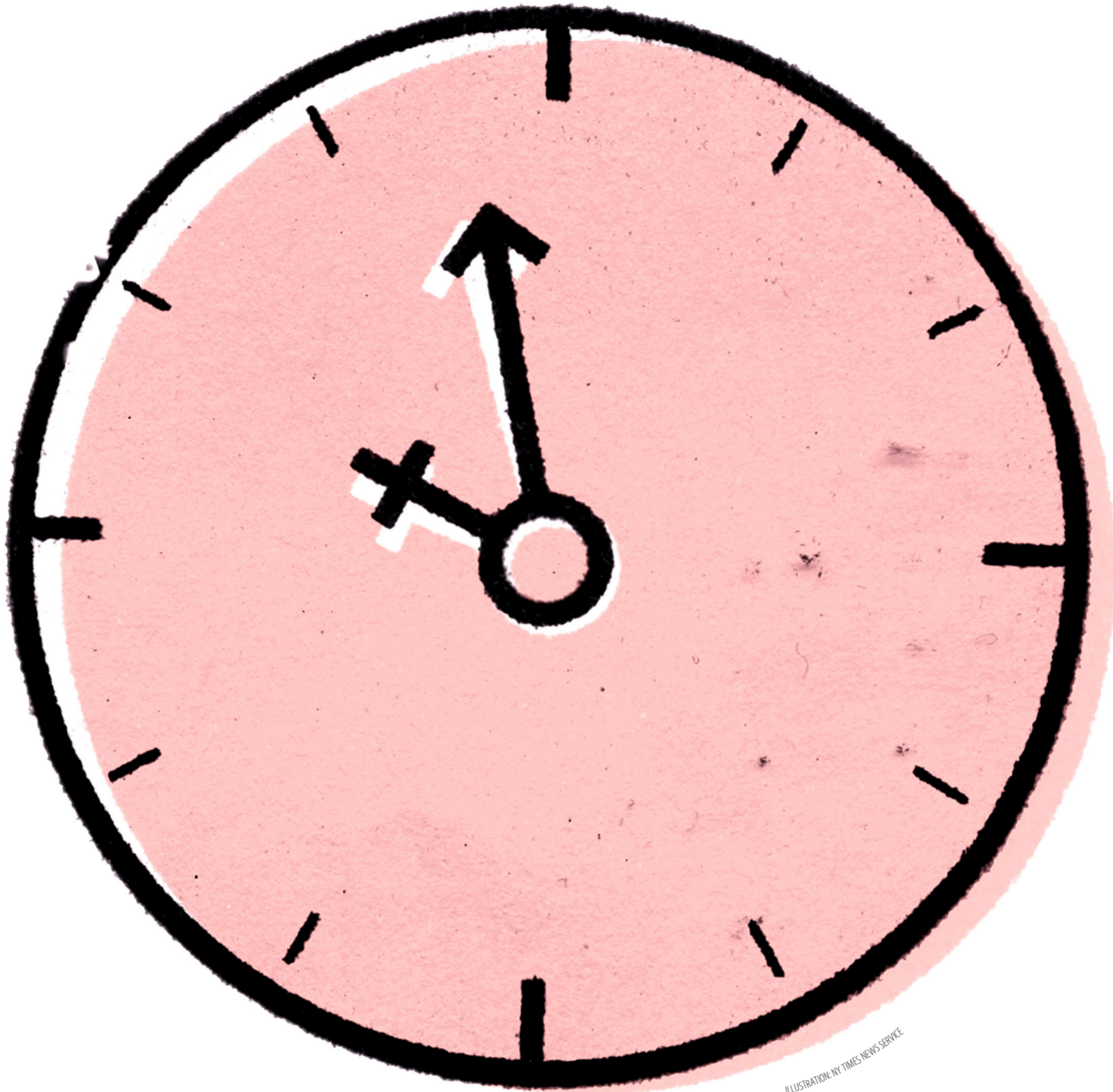
Although individual experiences certainly vary, "Changes in arousal clearly are associated with menopause," according to a 2007 article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. The author, Jennifer E. Potter of Harvard Medical School and Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston, said physical factors include less blood flow to genital organs, a decrease in vaginal lubrication and a decreased response to touch.

Women can achieve orgasm throughout their lives, but they typically need more direct, more intense and longer stimulation of the clitoris to reach a climax, Potter noted.

Another common experience is a diminished intensity of orgasm and painful uterine contractions after orgasm, although the women surveyed by SIECUS said overall that they remained satisfied with sex.

Yet as Potter put it, "What might be a satisfying sexual life for one woman may seem woefully inadequate to another," adding that what a woman expects from her sex life can make a difference. She cited the findings of various large surveys: "Only one-third to one-half of women who report decreased desire or response believe they have a problem or feel distress for which they would like help."

So what happens to a woman's body when levels of sex hormones fall?



## Sex after menopause

*For most postmenopausal women, hormone-related changes are the primary factors that interfere with sexual satisfaction*

BY JANE E. BRODY  
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

### A LIBIDO DRUG FOR WOMEN?

Since testosterone is the "libido hormone" for both men and women, therapists have long pondered the effectiveness and safety of providing testosterone treatments for postmenopausal women who have lost interest in sex. Only one product, Estratest, is commercially marketed now, though it is not approved for treating low libido. And it contains estrogens, which may

be unsafe for some women. The US Food and Drug Administration has thus far declined to approve a testosterone patch, though compounding pharmacies can prepare testosterone creams for individual customers.

A one-year placebo-controlled study published in November in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, involving 814 middle-age women with low libido,

found that those treated with a patch providing 300 micrograms of testosterone a day experienced one additional satisfying sexual episode a month. But a patch at half the dosage provided no benefit. Side effects of the treatment were considered mild; they included increased hair growth and acne.

— JANE E. BRODY

Although estrogen is a woman's predominant hormone before menopause, testosterone, produced in women primarily by the ovaries and adrenal glands, is considered the libido hormone for both men and women.

Testosterone levels in women decline by about 50 percent between the ages of 20 and 45, and the amount of testosterone produced continues to decline gradually as women age. While menopause itself has no direct effect on testosterone production, surgical removal of the ovaries can cause an abrupt drop in this hormone and accompanying sexual desire, especially for women who have not gone through natural menopause.

For some women, the increased ratio of testosterone to estrogen that occurs after menopause gives their sex drive a boost, the authors Wingart and Kantowitz point out.

But for most women, the menopausal effects of low levels of estrogen are the primary deterrents to sexual pleasure. In addition to the infamous hot flashes, changes in the vagina and vulva can have serious effects on the sexual experience.

— With little or no estrogen, vaginal walls become dry, thin and less elastic, causing pain during penetration.

— Diminished blood flow to the genital area means it can take much longer for a woman to feel aroused.

— The anticipation of painful uterine contractions with orgasm can be a turnoff.

— A leakage of urine some women experience during sex can prompt them to avoid it.

### HELPFUL TREATMENTS

Linda, who asked that her last name not be used, said she was more concerned about reviving her sex life than a possible increased risk of hormone-induced cancer or heart disease. A prescription of the drug Estratest, which combines estrogen and testosterone, solved her problem.

But taking estrogen orally is not recommended for women who have had breast cancer or are at high risk for developing it. Also, to protect the uterus against cancer, estrogen should be combined with a progestin.

An alternative that works for some is vaginal application of a little estrogen via a cream, ring or tablet, which keeps the hormone from passing through the liver and diminishes the amount that enters the bloodstream.

Gynecologists concerned about safety are more likely to recommend a non-oil-based lubricant. Besides popular products like K-Y jelly, Wingart and Kantowitz suggest several longer-lasting products that have an adhesive quality, including Replens, K-Y Long-Lasting Vaginal Moisturizer and Astroglide Silken Secret. The authors said "women who have intercourse regularly seem to generate more lubrication than those who do it less frequently."

Infrequent intercourse or prolonged periods without it can result in a narrowing of the vagina that can be countered by the use of lubricated vaginal dilators. For women whose sex lives are disrupted by lack of a partner, the authors recommend self-stimulation. Potter suggested that even for women with partners, a vibrator or small battery-powered vacuum pump can aid in arousal.

While a Viagra-like drug is not yet an option for women, use of the antidepressant bupropion (Wellbutrin at 300mg a day) may improve sexual arousal and satisfaction in women who are not depressed. And Potter pointed out that remaining physically fit can also help.

## [ JOURNALISM ]

# Blog steps into gap left by floundering old media

*In four years it has gone from upstart to online powerhouse — and now it wants to cover news. Can Huffington Post replace America's ailing newspapers?*

BY ED PILKINGTON  
THE GUARDIAN, NEW YORK

There's precious little good news from America's current affairs media these days. Barely a week passes without another announcement of savage staff cuts, bankruptcies or even closures at newsrooms across the US. But last week champagne corks were popping. The Huffington Post, the New York-based liberal blog, announced it was setting up a US\$1.75 million fund to help fill the gap left by the decimation of US investigative teams.

The initiative, said the site's founder, Arianna Huffington, was an attempt to preserve good journalism in America. "For too long," she said, "we've had too many autopsies and not enough biopsies. The HuffFund is our attempt to change this."

The aim is to dig away at weighty subjects, starting with the economic crisis. The fund will provide for up to 10 staff, supplemented by freelancers, many of them old media stalwarts sacked from failing news institutions.

The fact that the rescue mission is being launched under the flag of the HuffPo — a blog best known for its vibrant commentary rather than news — underlines the blurring effect of the Internet revolution. Blogs are inheriting the investigative work of newspapers; newspapers are blogging.

The fund also signals the Web site's ambition

to move to a more central position in the media landscape — it began to call itself an "Internet newspaper" last year. April 2009 may well be seen as the moment the Huffington Post came of age.

The HuffPo's rise has been impressive. Less than four years old and with fewer than 60 staff (including seven news reporters), it is now a competitor to the *New York Times*, 158 years old and with more than 1,000 journalists. According to the ratings Web site Comscore, in February the HuffPo drew more than a third of the *Times*'s traffic: 7.3 million unique users to 18.4 million.

Given the HuffPo's ambition and position, some have started to question its methods, which they see as more in keeping with a startup company undergoing breathtaking growth than a beacon of journalistic hope and excellence.

It is a paradox that although the Huffington Post is household currency in liberal America, the company remains relatively little known. The focus is almost always on Arianna Huffington herself and her colorful life story — born in Greece, educated in England; married to and divorced from an oil millionaire; a right-winger turned left-wing scourge of Bush and champion of Obama.

Yet a steady trickle of information has started to flow from people with experience of the site who raise concerns that standards are not keeping up with the exponential increase in the Web site's size and clout. In the past 18 months several

experienced journalists have left core positions. The former managing editor, Elinor Shields, who came from the BBC, has not yet been replaced and she left in 2007 (though HuffPo is poised to appoint someone); the blog editor, Frank Wilkinson, now edits the US version of the *Week* (British weekly digest of UK and foreign media); Michelle Kung is now at the *Wall Street Journal*. The two journalists, including Amanda Michel, behind the groundbreaking and successful experiment in citizen journalism, OffTheBus, also left earlier this year. The project was designed to finish after the election but the departures were still surprising.

Some could argue this is a natural phenomenon in such a fast-moving world. And the HuffPo has made some good signings recently, notably the Washington reporter Ryan Grim, who was at the respected political Web site Politico. But key positions remain filled by people who came to the site with limited journalistic experience. Matthew Palevsky, for instance, has been brought in to run a new citizen journalism venture in Michel's absence — pending the appointment of a new editor. He graduated from university last year. He also happens to be Huffington's godson.

Marc Cooper, who worked with Michel on OffTheBus, left the Web site in January and now teaches journalism at the University of Southern California, where he also runs an online journal. He has been on both sides of the old/new media

divide, having worked as a magazine writer and editor. Before he quit, he approached the founders about extending citizen journalism throughout the Web site.

He says they were resistant to the idea of having experienced journalists leading the project, which he felt was a requirement to maintain editorial standards. "I found there was an unbreachable gap between the scope of the HuffPo as a very big and powerful Web site, and its disproportionately undeveloped editorial processes."

Cooper stressed that he wants the Web site to succeed and was proud of his involvement with it. Yet he believes its processes are sometimes immature. "I don't see enough news judgment, or emphasis on the quality of reporting."

Arianna Huffington accepts that growth presents new challenges. "We have put systems in place to make sure our reporters are properly edited, that there is constant communication between them and editors and as we are growing and expanding we are going to do more of that," she said.

Other former employees interviewed by the *Guardian* would not go on the record, pointing out that every staff member has to sign a contract forbidding talk of internal matters. But several felt that as the site grows, it needs to invest in more original journalism. Huffington this week told Mediabistro that almost a third of the site's

content "comes from original reporting." But most of the news content — as opposed to its commentary — involves aggregation in the form of links to other news providers.

During last year's election campaign, reporters were encouraged by Huffington to stay at their desks rather than go out into the field. They were told desk-based journalism, often spent listening to the candidates' conference calls, would be more productive. Others regretted the lack of any face-to-face communication between reporters and editors — there are no regular daily news conferences and only one fixed weekly conference call between Huffington and the politics team, although there is regular digital dialogue.

A final area of concern was the way stories are placed on the front page. The co-founder Kenneth Lerer frequently determines which stories lead the blog, and even writes headlines. As chairman of a company that was not long ago valued at up to US\$200 million, aren't his interventions in some way comparable to Rupert Murdoch's interference in the front pages of his newspapers and thus potentially discomforting the blog's liberal readers?

None of this would matter were the HuffPo not the powerhouse it has become. While the *New York Times* is in a life-or-death struggle to pay its debts, the HuffPo in December attracted another US\$25 million in venture capital.