Aphrodisiacs ? do they really make you randy? [1]

Dear Alice,

Is there a known aphrodisiac that really works?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Although aphrodisiacs are based more on cultural myth than fact, their allure continues. Throughout history, people all over the world have tried certain foods, beverages, drugs, and chemicals in the hopes of being bestowed some magical aphrodisiac powers that will pep up their sex lives. However, according to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), no purported aphrodisiac has been scientifically proven to be effective at meeting its claims.

Named after Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, beauty, and fertility, aphrodisiacs are substances that supposedly elicit sexual desire and arousal, enhance sex drive and sexual "performance," and extend sexual energy. The fact that some well-known aphrodisiacs look similar to men's and women's genitals, or are derived from animal sex organs, was no accident.

The following have been believed to be aphrodisiacs at one time or another:

- **Spanish fly ? the most famous reputed aphrodisiac of all:** Made from ground up beetles of the *Lytta vesicatoria* species, its active ingredient, *cantharidin*, may cause increased blood flow to the genitals, resulting in sensations of warmth. While this is likely how it got its reputation as a sex enhancer, it has some distinctively non-enhancing side effects: it may irritate the bladder or urethra and can permanently scar urethral tissue or infect the genitourinary tract; this may lead to an abnormally prolonged or constant erection (priapism [2]) or an engorged vulva and vagina, both of which are often painful. With prolonged use, the Spanish fly can be poisonous, or even fatal.
- **Oysters, clams, and other seafood resembling sex organs:** Resembling female sex organs, shellfish?most notably oysters?are often clichéd aphrodisiacs. Some seafood has, however, been found to contain compounds that help release hormones such as estrogen and testosterone.
- **Ground rhinoceros horn:** The term "horny" was apparently coined from this "sexual enhancer."
- **Bananas, asparagus, and other phallic foods:** The long, curved shapes of many foods have brought about stories of their sexual powers. From a more practical
standpoint bananas and asparagus are rich in potassium and B vitamins, necessities for sex hormone production.

- **Honey:** Reminiscent of sweet vaginal fluid. In ancient times, it was traditional to present the newlyweds with honey to help them enjoy their first sexual encounters, and it is said to intensify orgasms.
- **Ginseng:** Some suggest ginseng to be an aphrodisiac because, like many of the other foods on our list, it resembles parts of human anatomy; ?ginseng? actually means ?man root.? Studies have suggested a sexual response in animals that have been given ginseng, but there is no evidence to date of ginseng having any effect on humans.
- **Chocolate:** Chocolate contains chemicals thought to effect neurotransmitters in the brain, which may heighten pleasure.
- **Chilies, curries, and other spices and spicy foods:** They make the heart beat faster and produce perspiration, which commonly occur during sex.
- **Raw bull's testicles:** Testicles are purported to be have sexual-enhancing capacities because they contain testosterone; cooking them, however, breaks down this hormone.
- **Yohimbine ? an extract from the bark of the West African yohimbe tree:** Although more human research is needed, results from animal studies indicate that it may have the potential to be particularly helpful for men who have difficulties maintaining an erection. It's not as likely to enhance sexual arousal or desire.

It is important to remember that aphrodisiacs (along with other herbal supplements) are not regulated by the FDA. Therefore, it can be hard to know exactly what you're getting when you pick up a bottle of "liquid love/lust" from your local sex shop. If you do decide to give store-bought aphrodisiacs a try, make sure you know enough about all the ingredients and buy from a company with which others have had good experiences.

Sometimes drugs are used as aphrodisiacs. Alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, amphetamines, and barbiturates, for example, help reduce or remove inhibitions and/or produce pleasurable feelings and sensations that could lead one to feel sexually aroused. However, instead of this intended outcome, decreased or no sexual response could occur, often when taking moderate or larger amounts or from long-term usage. Dependency and other more serious harms can also result. In addition, people's judgment is often impaired, leaving them more vulnerable to sexual assault, as the recipient or perpetrator.

Another drug, amyl nitrite (a.k.a., "poppers"), is thought to intensify and prolong sensations of orgasm, probably by increasing blood flow to the genitals and distorting time perception. However, it can also cause dizziness, severe headaches, unconsciousness, and a drop in blood pressure that could become dangerous.

Regardless of whether or not aphrodisiacs work, the power of suggestion (both psychologically and emotionally) is key. If a person believes that using any particular substance will help enhance his or her sex life, and is receptive to that longing, then it can help bring about sexual desire and arousal (at least in the short-term). Of course, a good night's sleep, trust, privacy, confidence in your contraception, self-confidence, and a turned-on partner may do the same thing.
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