Dear Alice,

I know all the effects smoking has on the body, but nobody seems to have information on what it does to your sex life. What are the effects, like dryness, de-sensitivity in areas, etc? If I quit, would sex be better?

Mrs. Curious

Answer

Dear Mrs. Curious,

You are right to assume that smoking affects one's sex life. In fact, several studies have looked at exactly this question in regard to male impotence and found that there is a link between smoking and difficulties having an erection. Unfortunately, there is little research on the effects of smoking on women's sexual health; this is indicative of a general state of research on women's sexual health lagging far behind research on men (an issue unto itself). But the reason behind the strong link between smoking and male impotence can be presumed to affect women as well.

Nicotine is a vasoconstrictor, meaning it tightens blood vessels and restricts blood flow. In the long term, it has even been shown to cause permanent damage to arteries. Since a man's erection depends on blood flow, researchers assumed smoking would affect erections. Studies have confirmed this time and again. In a study published in *Addiction Behavior*, it was shown that just two cigarettes could cause softer erections in male smokers. Research has also shown a correlation between men affected by impotence and smoking.

It should be noted that most of these men were older, and smoking is considered just one cause of erectile dysfunction. The others include stress, hypertension, alcoholism, diabetes, and prostate surgery. Young smokers may not notice negative effects right away, but they could be setting themselves up for "failure" later on.

So what does all this about impotence mean for women? During sexual arousal, the labia, clitoris, and vagina also swell up with blood, similar to a man's penis, enhancing sensation and excitement. If nicotine can restrict blood flow and cause erectile dysfunction in men, it may be reasonable to predict that blood flow is restricted in women as well, and may also have a negative effect on sensation.
It's hard to say whether your sex life will improve if you quit smoking, since there are many factors influencing your sex life beyond genital sensation. Of course, quitting smoking would also eliminate stained teeth, unhealthy skin, rapid accumulation of wrinkles on the face, and clothing, hair, and breath that smell of smoke. That might improve one's sex life. Decreasing your risk of cancer and heart disease—which tend to have negative effects on one's sex life—could be sexy in the long run.

If you have questions or concerns about sexual performance, you can make an appointment with a health care provider. You may also want to speak with a tobacco cessation specialist about quitting smoking, you can find one through your city's local health department.

Quitting smoking won't harm your sex life, and will greatly benefit all areas of your life, so if you're thinking about quitting anyway, why not give it a try? If you discover a new realm of sensation during sex from smoking cessation, that's just one more benefit you'll experience from quitting.

Alice!
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