
Dear Alice,

I play tennis at a high level in India. But I masturbate and somehow my friends have come to know and tease me on it. I wanted to know does masturbation have any bad effects and especially on sportspeople? Please reply my question as I feel very guilty after doing it. Thank you!

Answer

Dear Reader,

Thanks for serving this question! First of all, little to no research has been done on energy expended during masturbation, nor on its effect (if any) on athletic performance. Some research has been completed on sexual activity and athletic performance, but it's not very robust and may or may not include masturbation. However, research has shown that masturbation carries a variety of benefits [2], including stress relief, improved sleep, and better body image (read more about this in the Q&A Masturbation healthy? [3]). Some of these benefits may, in fact, improve your tennis game. Want to know more? Then lob your ball over the net and read on.

Most of the research on sexual activity's effect on athletic performance was conducted using only those assigned male at birth as subjects, ignoring specifics of sexual activity or type of sports, and lacking influence from a diverse set of cultures and religions. Therefore, it may be helpful to keep this in mind when considering the results from these studies as they likely limit the degree to which the findings can be generalized to certain populations. Some of these results, as well as anecdotal reports, indicate that sexual activity may benefit athletic performance, especially if occurring between ten and twelve hours before the athletic event. Other reports indicate that sexual activity just before the athletic event (two hours prior) may negatively affect the athlete's performance. It's also possible that the perception of how sexual activity could impact athletic performance may actually be just as influential as the sexual activity itself.

Despite this lack of empirical information, research indicates that many athletic coaches (and others) may reinforce myths about sexual activity and athletic performance; most of these myths have since been debunked. For example, studies indicate that some coaches and athletes believe that sexual activity may expend too much energy and cause fatigue.
However, sexual activity generally burns between 25 and 250 calories per hour, roughly equivalent to walking up two to eight flights of stairs. Research indicates that this didn't impact athletes who engaged in sexual activity ten to twelve hours before their athletic event. Others may falsely believe that sexual activity causes lack of focus. In actuality, though, sexual activity promotes relaxation, which is helpful for endurance and coordination, as well as sleep quality.

Two other commonly held myths have to do with aggression. One myth is that abstinence from sexual activity may lead to sexual frustration and aggression. For those who aren't typically sexually active, some studies indicate that frustration stemming from prolonged abstinence may promote desire to perform better athletically. However, those who are typically sexually active may feel disruption of their routine if they begin abstaining, decreasing performance. Another myth is that ejaculation draws testosterone away from the body, reducing aggression and muscle strength. However, hormones can fluctuate regardless of sexual activity, and some studies have shown that testosterone levels rise within the blood and saliva as a result of sexual activity.

All in all, it's crucial to keep in mind that the evidence behind sexual activity (including masturbation) and physical activity isn't as precise or robust, and myths surrounding the negative effects of sexual activity can be more harmful than the effects themselves. You may want to consider whether you've noticed any patterns in your masturbation habits and your athletic performance? on the days that you've masturbated and then engaged in sports, how have you felt? How did it affect your performance, if it did at all? This may help you determine what influences masturbation has on your tennis game. You may also want to think more about why you feel guilty regarding your masturbation. Is it your friends' judgments, your own views of masturbation, or something else? Working these thoughts out may help with feeling better about your sexual habits and your athletic performance. If you have more questions about masturbation, you can also check out the Masturbation section of the Go Ask Alice! Sexual & Reproductive Health archives.

Always a pleasure,

Alice!

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