

Forget what they tell you: kebab breath is an aphrodisiac

SEX MYTHS

we all need to ditch

From monogamy to masturbation, there are certain universal “truths” that could do with a bit of a refresh. Here’s everything you need to know – about everything you think you already do...

Words FRANKI COOKNEY

“Your generation didn’t invent sex”

my mum (who grew up in the ‘60s) likes to remind me. Maybe we didn’t. But studies show we are more open to exploration, more accepting of other people’s gender identity and sexual orientation and have more conversations about pleasure and consent. We’re sex positive and redefining what good sex looks like, and yet... there are still a few myths lingering that are really f*cking up our sex lives.

In *Mind The Gap: The Truth About Desire And How To Futureproof Your Sex Life*, clinical psychologist and psychosexologist Dr Karen Gurney explains that many sexual problems are linked to lingering beliefs about how our bodies and sex lives should work. “So much of the sex therapy I do with couples and individuals is directly related to ideas about sex that just aren’t backed up by science,” she says. And if we’re still holding onto those false ideas about what sex “should” look like, it will be hard to tap into what we really want. Here’s how to ditch them for good... >

When you can't believe how good your shampoo smells



THE MYTH

You should orgasm

through penetration

We might have Freud to thank for this one. In 1905 he dismissed clitoral orgasms, writing that a “mature” woman experienced vaginal orgasms.

Multiple studies have since debunked this – we now know that over three quarters of women (and people with vulvas) don't orgasm through penetration alone. Less than 5% of women masturbate using only penetration.* Yet for many women in relationships with men, penetration is considered the main event.

“The statistics on what women do sexually when left to their own devices speak volumes about what women's bodies need and respond to,” says Dr Gurney. Basically, if you have a clitoris, it's probably a big part of how you reach orgasm. That goes for trans and non-binary folks too.

✚ DITCH IT: “If you've never talked to your partner about how you prefer or are able to orgasm, this can seem daunting,” says sex educator and co-founder of The Intimology School Of Sexual Wellness, Nadia Deen. “A good place to start is by looking at sex toys together online. Phrase it as something new that you want to try. Lots of toys can be used alongside penetration.”

Porn can help here too. Independent ethical porn studios such as Bright Desire and Ersties bring female pleasure to the fore and show that clitoral orgasms are anything but immature.

THE MYTH

You should want

spontaneous sex

When you're dating someone new, it may feel like you can't keep your hands off each other. As a relationship becomes more established, that spontaneity often wears off. Yet many of us adhere to the idea that sex should “just happen” and feel bad about ourselves when it

doesn't work out that way. This myth is all down to how sexuality has been studied. Men generally do report high levels of spontaneous desire, while a large proportion of women say they “rarely” or “never” feel that way – yet that part of the study is rarely mentioned. “Women's desire is now known to work best when triggered, rather than just occurring out of the blue,” Dr Gurney says. She uses a triangle diagram of “conditions for good sex” to get people to think about what works for them. It consists of psychological arousal, physical touch and being in the moment. All must be met for sex to be truly fulfilling. The kind of touch we like and what arouses us psychologically will vary. There is no right or wrong way to get in the mood for sex.

✚ DITCH IT: It's time to get your diary out. While the idea of scheduling sex may be a turn-off, it needn't be regimented, says Gayathiri Kamalakanthan, sex educator and team member of Decolonising Contraception, a community-based

organisation created by Black people and people of colour that aims to make sexual and reproductive health information accessible for all. “Put aside time in the evening to be together, without distractions – no TV, no phones. You might not even have sex, it might just be naked cuddling – it's about prioritising that time together.”

THE MYTH

Sex ends when

someone orgasms

In the '60s, sex researchers Masters and Johnson observed that couples having sex (yes, they watched them) went through four phases: excitement, plateau, orgasm and resolution. Because men experience a refractory period post-orgasm, this became the de facto “finish line”.

“If this model were based on female arousal, it could go from arousal to

orgasm, back to arousal, then orgasm again, given that many women are multi-orgasmic,” says Dr Gurney. For women in relationships with women, sex often tends to flow in this way (and these women report more frequent orgasms too). Orgasm, then, could perhaps be considered the end of one stage of sex. And let's not forget that sex can be fun without an orgasm too.

✚ DITCH IT: Reframe your mindset and think about what makes sex great for you. A study into why people have sex threw up no fewer than 237 different reasons.† “It's fun” and “It feels good” came close to the top, while “I wanted to have an orgasm” didn't even scrape the top 10.

“It's such a shame when our beliefs about sex are based around a man's ejaculation. It puts a lot of pressure on men as well,” points out clinical psychologist and psychosexual therapist Dr Amani Zarroug. “Orgasm obviously is an amazing, wonderful thing that can happen through having sex, but it doesn't have to be the only amazing thing.”

THE MYTH

Men have higher sex

drives than women

It might seem like an age-old stereotype but the idea that men are the horny ones is actually relatively new. Around the 5th century, the Latin priest Jerome described the female sex drive as “insatiable” (and now we know that our arousal can keep going without a refractory period, we can start to see why). Modern beliefs, says Dr Gurney, are down to how we define “desire”. Women do tend to report less spontaneous desire, but that doesn't mean we don't want or enjoy sex just as much as men. “Women's arousal and desire work perfectly well for most in the right circumstances,” she says. More importantly, the idea that people have a fixed sex drive is scientifically flawed. “Desire is never static,” says Dr Gurney. “It is dependent on context.” Low desire is usually caused by environmental or psychological factors such as stress,

tiredness, how safe and confident we feel with our partner, and feelings of shame we might have around sex or our bodies, as well as our menstrual cycle, overall health and medications we might be on.

✚ DITCH IT: If you have mismatched libidos in your relationship, don't worry – it's really common. The key is to identify what the “right circumstances” for desire are for you. Apps like Ferly, which offers prompts and programmes to help you explore your personal relationship with pleasure and incorporates mindfulness practices, can be useful.

THE MYTH

Physical attraction

doesn't matter

Anyone who's been single for more than five minutes will be familiar with the well-meaning refrain that you shouldn't judge a book by its cover. But if you don't feel a flicker of sexual interest at all, it's not a great sign.

“There is research to suggest that being more physically attracted to a partner at the start of a relationship is a protective factor for desire later down the line,” confirms Dr Gurney. Dwindling attraction can be the first indicator that something else is wrong, so don't write it off as an inevitable consequence of a long-term relationship. It's likely to be caused by stress linked to life events, a lack of quality time, shifts in your relationship dynamic (such as having children) or overfamiliarity.

✚ DITCH IT: Losing attraction to your partner is common, so don't worry, says Deen. “Think about how you got to that place. What's happened to make you look at your partner differently?” Once you've identified that issue, you can return to the question of attraction. “In my experience, it can be useful to revisit it later on, once changes are in place,” says Dr Gurney.



THE MYTH

Women are naturally

monogamous

Popular culture has us all believing that men are the ones out “sowing their oats” while women sit around waiting at home. But in reality?

“Women's desire for the same partner is more likely to decline, whereas men are more likely to maintain a desire for the same partner over many years,” says Dr Gurney. The fact that women struggle with monogamy is actually well-documented by sex scientists, who agree that monogamy is not a “natural” trait, but rather the result of cultural and social constraints.

“In lots of African and South Asian cultures pre-colonisation, there were different sorts of families,” says Kamalakanthan. “If you think about it, it seems absurd that we would expect one person to fulfil all of our sexual or romantic needs and desires.”

That's not to say that there's anything wrong with desiring a monogamous relationship. But there's also nothing wrong with fancying other people.

“Demonising that desire isn't going to work because then you suppress it and feel resentful and that can lead to relationship breakdown,” says Kamalakanthan.

“There is no right or wrong way to get in the mood”

✚ DITCH IT: If you're daydreaming about cheating, the first thing to do is acknowledge it.

Talking about celebrity crushes is a good place to start. From there, building up to sharing your fantasies with each other can actually help spark renewed desire in your relationship. Or, if you're curious about opening up the relationship, there are many fantastic resources. Read *The Ethical Slut* by Dossie Easton and Janet W Hardy, check out the *Polyamory Weekly* podcast or tune into Cosmo's very own podcast, *All The Way With... Polyamory* to learn more about the lifestyle. ♦