

A NOTE/BLESSING FROM ORLY:

Pleasure is important. As people, and particularly as women, we are often encouraged to put aside our pleasure for productivity, for propriety, for pleasing others. It makes me happy to think of women around the world getting together to discuss pleasure.

The beginning of me understanding orgasms actually came from having conversations with other women. I was blessed to be surrounded by women who did not feel shame in speaking about their sexual desires. It was talking to my friends about orgasms made me brave enough to try create one for myself. It was talking to my mom (and I am so lucky to have a mother who is open to speaking about sex) that made me realize how orgasms could be a gift. She encouraged me to pursue them, and made sure I got a copy of *The Hite Report* (mentioned below) when I became sexually active.

It is incredible to compare those conversations, which were enlightening, validating, and non-judgmental, with the kind of research I sifted through to put together this guide. The information about orgasms online is scant at best, and judgmental at worst. I was able to uncover a few gems, but not nearly as much as we deserve as women.

My blessing for your Well Circles is that you should find the information you need in your discussion, or at least feel accompanied in your doubts, musings, frustrations, or questions by the women in your groups. I hope that wherever you find pleasure, whether it is in your own body, in a morsel of delicious food, in a nap with sun dappling your skin, in the embrace of a friend or partner, that it should make you feel connected to the beauty of life.

DISCLAIMER

In the month of Adar, when we are commanded to be joyful, it would seem only appropriate to explore the topic of orgasms — one of the body's most unbridled expressions of joy.

As with all topics of sexual health, it's essential to be mindful of the experiences others may be bringing with them to the discussion. While for some thinking about orgasms can be a purely ecstatic thing, for others it may be a source of confusion, pressure (from a partner or from oneself), disappointment, or a trigger for sexual trauma. Some of your participants may have never experienced an orgasm (after all, it's estimated that 10-15% of women cannot reach this kind of climax).

And in that complex relationship that each participant may have to her own orgasm, we can't forget the historical context of the female orgasm. Throughout history, the female orgasm has been



A LITTLE BIT ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When Orly was a young girl, she wanted to grow up to be a giraffe. Instead, she moved to New York City to study writing and work in education. Orly enjoys dousing everything she eats with spicy sauce, beating her friends at Bananagrams, and being a part of *At The Well*. She is honored to be writing this guide.

seen as necessary for fertility, as a means to pacify hysteria, and as an unattainable, mystical act. It is unfortunate that most of the framing of the female orgasm in history and society was done by men.

That is why the central purpose of this discussion — women openly discussing orgasm and pleasure (be it sexual or not) — is so radical! Through this very discussion creating our own definitions, discussions, and disagreements, free from what may have been superimposed by others. That is why greeting each person's opinions with a combination of acceptance and an ability to disagree, a tenuous balance, is essential in shaping a new, inclusive conversation.

THE SCIENCE OF ORGASM

Let's start by understanding what exactly is happening in the body during an orgasm.

Generally, an orgasm happens as a result of sexual arousal (although this is not always the case). Some women can achieve orgasm from just clenching their thighs, having a fantasy, or even during their sleep.¹ As a woman is turned on, blood rushes to her pelvic area, her clitoris becomes enlarged and shifts in position, all the while, her genital muscles become tense. An orgasm is the release of all the tension that is built up as a woman is aroused.²

As the woman orgasms, muscle contractions ripple through her vagina, pelvic floor, uterus, and anus. An orgasm can consist of 3–15 of these waves of contractions, happening about once a second. Other muscles may contract in that moment, too (think about the clenched toes you see in movies, or tensed up faces).

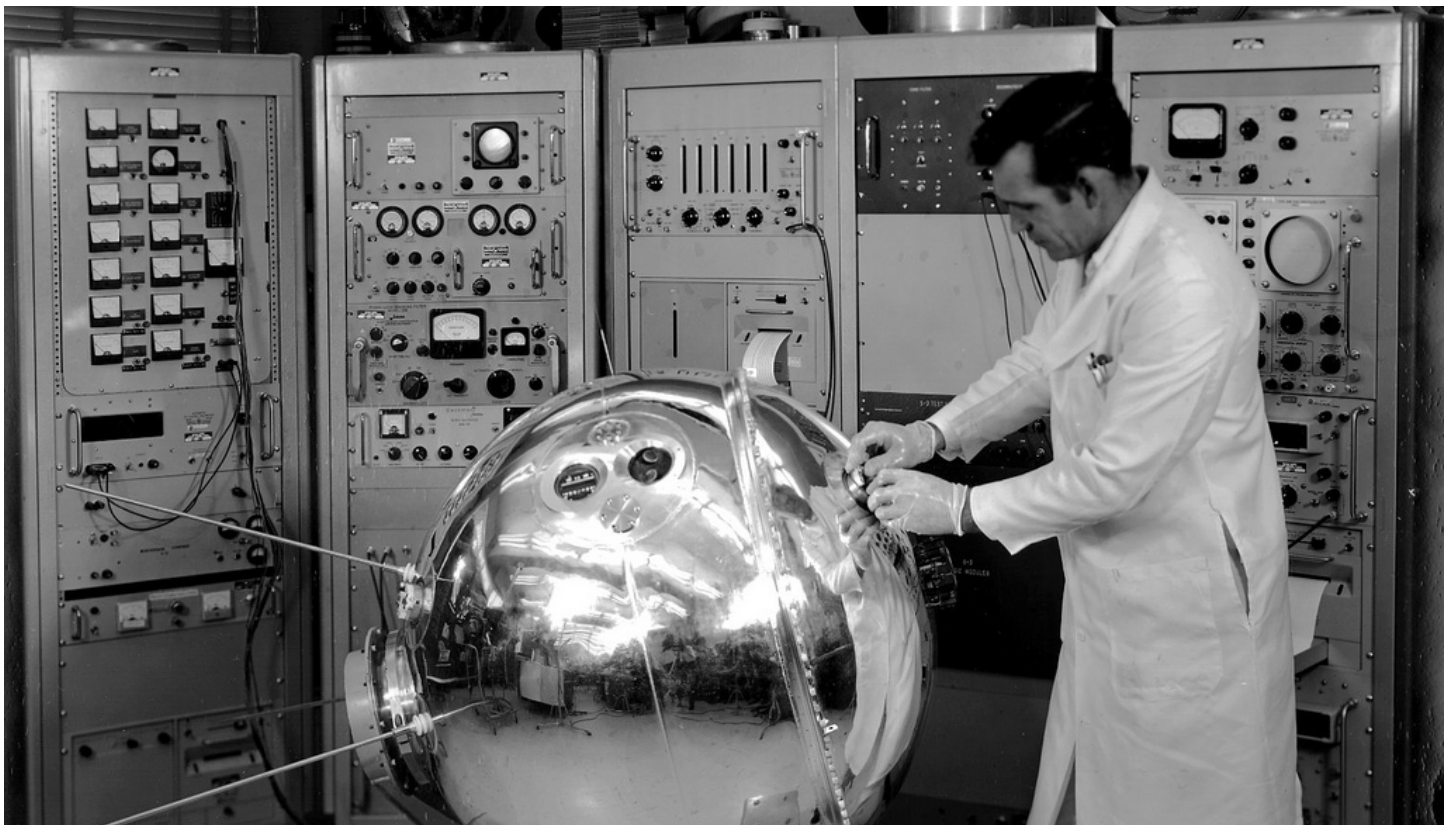
An orgasm doesn't just have an effect on your muscles, it also has an effect on your brain. Women release chemicals like oxytocin and endorphins when they climax. Oxytocin is a chemical related to affection and bonding (in fact, new mothers produce lots of

oxytocin). It also is a chemical associated with building trust. Endorphins are related to stress regulation and pain relief, and are also released during laughter and exercise.

Talking about the science of female orgasms would not be complete without giving a shout out to the clitoris. The clitoris is an amazing part of women's bodies! It is a button-like part of female genitalia that is about 3 inches long and half an inch wide and is our prominent pleasure center. The clitoris is located at the top of the labia minora (the inner folds of the vulva). The clitoris has 8,000 nerve endings (compared to penises, which have 4,000) and is in fact shaped a lot like a wishbone (though most of its structures are below our skin or obscured under the clitoral hood, which is analogous to foreskin on a penis).

1. Sexplanations. "Vaginal Orgasms???" Published 12 March 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pXVDOPyg_hU

2. Beland, Nicole. "The Female Orgasm: How It Works" *Women'sHealth*. 21 November 2005. <http://www.womenshealthmag.com/sex-and-love/sex-ed-anatomy-of-an-orgasm>



THE HISTORY OF ORGASMS

The way we think about and talk about the female orgasm has evolved over time. For a long time in Western cultures, up until about the Renaissance, people believed that female genitalia were an inverted version of male genitalia. They reasoned that for a woman to be able to become pregnant, she would have to orgasm and ejaculate just like the man. Causing a female orgasm was seen as a necessity for fertility.

In his book, "The Making of the Modern Body," Thomas Lacquer explains that this changed during the Enlightenment. Women were framed as being uninterested in sex, and their pleasure was no longer seen as essential during intercourse. As ideas of humanism and equal rights began to threaten the status quo, women's bodies were politicized and seen as "different." Instead of seeing the sexes as inverses of one another, women were seen as completely different (frail and fragile), and these differences were used as an argument to exclude women from the rights that humanism was bringing to all. Women were framed as being uninterested in sex.

The female orgasm came back into focus in the 1800s, when any kind of nervousness that women went through was diagnosed as "hysteria." Doctors helped women achieve orgasm — eventually inventing the vibrator — as a cure to this "disease."

In 1905, Freud posited a hierarchy of female orgasms that was particularly damaging. He believed that there were two types of orgasms: a less mature, clitoral orgasm, and a mature, vaginal orgasm. We'll discuss the effects and science behind these theories below.

In the 1940s, Alfred Kinsey brought much validation to people all across the land through his extensive research on sexual practices (including the statistic that 40 percent of women had achieved their first orgasm through masturbation).

Even though there has been an increase in information about female orgasms throughout the 20th and 21st century, there are still many societal forces that affect the way we think about orgasms.

There are two main forces that I'll focus on. First, there's the idea of the orgasm as being earth-shattering. Think of the last movie you saw with a sex scene. There was likely a panting, screaming, gasping woman. And while orgasm may be like this for some people, it's important to remember that our bodies are all different and so are the ways we react to pleasure. Some women may be completely quiet when they reach their climax, others may laugh, others may cry. There is no right way to have an orgasm!

The second force I want to bring up is the idea of the female orgasm as an unsolvable puzzle. If you do some searches online for female orgasm, you'll often see it surrounded by words like mysterious, understanding, elusive. Part of why the female orgasm is considered so mysterious is because women have been discouraged or shamed for talking about or acting on sexual desires for so long. The fact is, the female orgasm is just as normal or amazing as any other one of our bodily functions.

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THE VAGINAL ORGASM DEBATE

In 1905, Freud posited a theory about female orgasms that still has rippling effects today. He created a hierarchy of orgasms, claiming that orgasms achieved through clitoral stimulation were more immature than orgasms achieved through vaginal stimulation. Seems convenient that a man would claim that the orgasm achieved through penetrative sex would be the favorable one, right? Not to mention somewhat heteronormative.

The fact is, most women do not experience orgasm from penetration of the vagina (through partner or object) alone — calculations estimate that 50-75% of women do not. Of the women who do achieve orgasm through vaginal stimulation, it is unclear whether this results from an indirect stimulation of the clitoris. Even the famed G-Spot is still up for debate, with some researchers arguing that the arousal women may feel in the anterior wall of their vagina may result from a part of the clitoris extending back to this area.

Some have argued — including Shere Hite, the author of *The Hite Report*, which surveyed over 100,000 women ages 14-78 on their sexual preferences — that this is an indication that we should broaden the way we think of “sex.” Penetrative sex does not have to be the end-all-be-all of sensual pleasure, especially if you can achieve orgasm or pleasure through other acts.

For me, learning this was a revelation, and is still something that I struggle with. In our heteronormative society, the pinnacle of sex is penetration — it is the “home run” in the [problematic] baseball analogy of sex, and even the word “sex” usually refers to penetration. When I didn’t feel the kind of pleasure I expected from this act, I thought something was wrong with me. As I flipped through the pages of *The Hite Report*, and read that I was not alone, I felt relieved but also angry at society. Why wasn’t anybody else talking about this?! Why were these

expectations being put on women? If so many women felt more pleasure from other sexual acts as opposed to penetration, why was this the only act presented in the media?”

For good measure, I’ll add in the insight of Elizabeth Lloyd³, a philosopher of biology. Lloyd talks about the ways in which science has tried to find an evolutionary explanation to the female orgasm (since, unlike the male orgasm, which results in ejaculation, they do not contribute to conception). Lloyd observes that in many species, including humans, females have orgasms more rarely from intercourse and much more often from masturbation or other direct attention to the clitoris. While many [male] scientists often posit theories that try to relate the female orgasm back to reproduction (and Lloyd shows the flaws in most of their arguments), Lloyd instead argues that, since women and men evolved through similar processes, the female orgasm is a great bonus that women got to keep from the ancestry they share with men — kind of like men have nipples which serve no evolutionary function, while women’s nipples allow them to feed their young.

So, what do we do with all this, with the biological evidence that female orgasm is not necessarily related to reproduction, and therefore not related to intercourse? I say be kind to yourself as you seek pleasure. Pursue the acts, be they penetration, masturbation, or whatever else, that make you feel sexually fulfilled (through an orgasm or otherwise).

3. Lewens, Tim. “What is the female orgasm for? Science, gender, and the ‘upsuck’ theory that won’t go away” *Salon*. 7 February 2016. http://www.salon.com/2016/02/07/wha_is_the_female_orgasm_for_science_gender_bias_and_the_upsuck_theory_that_wont_go_away/

THE “IMPORTANCE” OF ORGASM

Many times, we see orgasm as the pinnacle of sexual acts. An interaction with a partner or with yourself is seen as a vehicle to get to this one, desirable destination: The orgasm. While orgasms can indeed feel wonderful, this laser-focus on getting to this place can lead to lots of pressure. This can mean that even when an entire sexual experience may have felt amazing but didn't end in orgasm, some may feel like labeling this moment as a failure.

Maybe we should think of orgasms as part of a larger category of pleasure that we should pursue, both sexually and non-sexually. What are other orgasm-like activities, ones that lead to an intense great feelings, that happen when you are with a partner? How about with yourself?

The following questions, taken from the Columbia FemSex/ AllSex curriculum, can guide your discussion on the importance of orgasms⁴. You can use these questions to discuss the importance of orgasm with your group:

How does orgasm play a different role in masturbation than in partner sex? More/less important, frequent?
If no orgasm occurs, is there some other indicator for when sex is finished?

Have you ever faked an orgasm? Why/why not?

Does orgasm factor into your fantasy?

Do you feel pressure to orgasm/make your partner orgasm/make yourself orgasm?

Do you expect an orgasm from your partner if you make them orgasm?

Does orgasming ever act as an indicator of a relationship/your comfort with a partner?

Do you ever stop yourself from orgasm?

Does your gender expression/other identities affect your relationship to orgasm?

Do you feel that orgasms are something you can demand from your partner? From yourself? Has a partner ever demanded them of you?

Can orgasms become a “sexual currency”? What are the benefits/dangers of this?

What role does orgasm play in representations of sex?

Is orgasm the ultimate goal of sexual activity? Masturbation?

Has not orgasming in a sexual situation ever proved to be positive/more pleasurable?

FOR THOSE WHO HAVE NOT ACHIEVED AN ORGASM

You are not alone! Between 10–15% of women have not felt an orgasm during their life. This may mean you are preorgasmic (you are capable of having an orgasm but have not yet had one), or anorgasmic (unable to have an orgasm).

There are a few reasons this may be⁴:

- Medical reasons: Certain types of illnesses related to the sexual cycle can cause this side effect
- Medications: Some medications, like SSRIs taken for depression, can interfere with one's ability to orgasm
- Psychological reasons: Sexual abuse, fear/anxiety around sex, difficulties with body image, and stress can all affect one's ability to orgasm

For women contending with these kinds of challenges and wanting help in changing their sex lives, seeing a physician or psychologist can be helpful. For some women who may not be experiencing the challenges mentioned above, but are still having trouble achieving an orgasm, it may be a matter of exploring your own body. Here are some things you can try:

If you haven't yet tried masturbating, this is something to explore. If you have, try new techniques. These can include trying out different positions (standing, laying on your stomach, laying on your back, sitting), different mediums (your own hand, a sex toy, a shower nozzle), and different movements and speeds (slow, fast, up, down, circles, etc.) Exploring takes time, and the more pressure you can take off yourself while doing so and the more you can approach it with curiosity, the more enjoyable the experience will be.

Create an atmosphere that turns you on or elevates the experience, like playing certain kinds of music, creating the right temperature and lighting, etc.

Sometimes, while you are exploring, you may feel frustrated that you are not yet achieving orgasm. For some people, the trick is to keep going. Think of what you are doing as getting a running start to jump off a diving board, you have to keep running until the end of the board.⁵

4. Mayo Clinic Staff. “Anorgasmia in Women” Mayo Clinic. 14 February 2015. <http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/anorgasmia/basics/causes/con-20033544>

5. <http://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/just-cant-orgasm>

FUN JEWISH FACT

In the Talmud⁶, it is stated that if a woman has an orgasm first when she is having sex with a man, it is more likely that she will have a male child. If the man has an orgasm first, it is more likely she will have a female child.

What we love At The Well, is not so much this actual non-factual teaching, but that for thousands of years, our tradition has been talking about the female orgasm.

6. "No Rabbi Shmuley, that's not what the Talmud Says", Finkorswim.com, 22 October 2014. <http://finkorswim.com/2014/10/22/no-rabbi-shmuley-thats-not-what-the-talmud-says/>

RESOURCES AND PROJECTS TO DISCUSS

Unfortunately, the world of the female orgasm is not being talked about enough, but there are a few great resources out there that are fighting the good fight:

OMGYes: OMGYes.com is a website where the results of speaking to 2,000 about sex and pleasure are compiled to help you understand your own pleasure. The site shares certain types of common techniques and patterns they found that lead women to orgasm, and even teach you to perform these on yourself or partner through "touchable" videos.

Sexplanations: These videos on YouTube from Dr. Lindsey Doe cover everything you've wondered about sexual health in inclusive and engaging videos. Dr. Lindsey also accepts questions from users and holds AMAs.

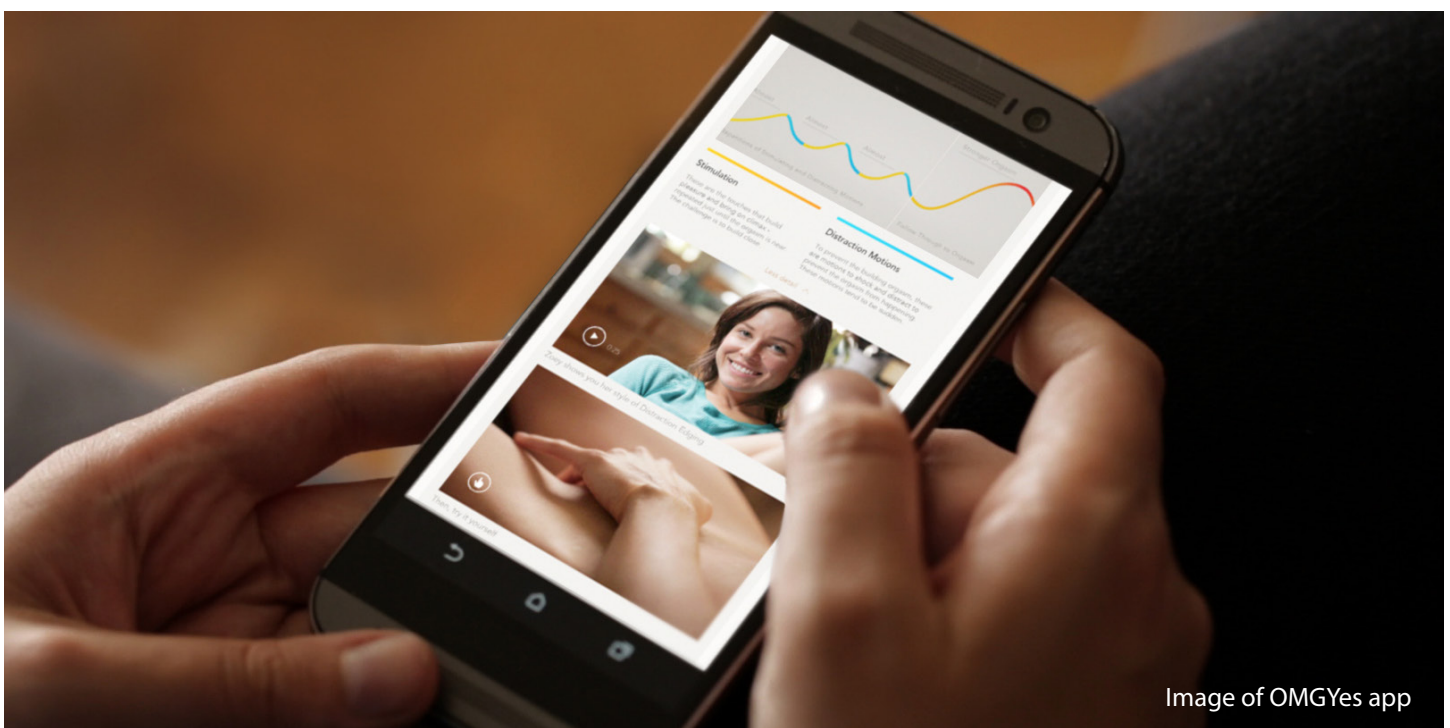


Image of OMGYes app

ACTIVITIES YOU CAN DO WITH YOUR WELL CIRCLE

Here are some ideas of discussions and activities you can do with your Well Circle to learn about female orgasms:

Snowball Discussion

For any of the sections that interest you above, share the information included and then think of a question that could spark a discussion (I'm including a few examples below to get you started). Have each participant in your group write down her answer on a piece of paper (warn participants that answers will be shared anonymously), crumple it up, and throw it into the center of the group. Then, mix up all the pieces of paper and have each person pick a paper and read the response to the group. After a participant has read the sheet of paper she picked, she can add her own opinions or questions about what she read.

Some question examples are:

When was your first orgasm? How did you know it was an orgasm?

What does an orgasm feel like for you?

What questions do you still have about female orgasms that you'd like the group to discuss?

Interview Your Orgasm

Have participants think about their orgasm as a person they are interviewing, and have them answer the following questions:

What is your favorite song? What is your favorite color? Who do you admire?

What do you look like? What do you like to eat?

Draw Your Orgasm

provide participants with paper, markers, and crayons and have everyone draw their orgasms. Participants can share their drawings with the group.

