

## **Guidelines for Enhancing Sexual Comfort and Reducing Painful Intercourse - 2019**

1. Occasional discomfort or pain during sex is a common experience for most women. However, chronic, uncontrollable pain is neither normal nor acceptable. Approximately 15% of women experience sexual pain problems.
2. Traditionally, when a gynecologist did a pelvic examination and found no specific medical cause for pain, it was diagnosed as a psychosomatic problem—"it's in your head." In truth, sexual pain is in your vulva or vagina. Sexual pain is a psychobiosocial phenomenon with multiple causes, dimensions, and solutions.
3. Consultation with a competent, caring gynecologist, internist, or nurse practitioner with a specialty in sexual pain can help you understand the pain problem and learn if there is a medical intervention or change in health habits that could facilitate your efforts at pain management.
4. In cases of chronic and severe pain, an interdisciplinary treatment team includes a couple sex therapist, a physician or nurse practitioner specializing in pain, and a female physical therapist with a specialty in pelvic floor musculature.
5. It is important to understand the issue as a pain problem, not a sex dysfunction. You can learn to manage sexual pain and build sexual comfort. You deserve to feel desire/pleasure/eroticism/ satisfaction, including during intercourse.
6. Use of a sexual lubricant (water-based and hypoallergenic), which feels and smells good, is helpful. Use the lubricant preventatively, as part of pleasuring. Waiting until you feel pain creates distress and reduces your enjoyment of the sexual experience.
7. Learn and utilize relaxation and mindfulness techniques, both cognitive and physical. These exercises help you relax your whole body, especially your pelvic muscles.
8. Use of graduated sized vaginal dilators is a valuable technique for many women who practice under the supervision of a female physical therapist.
9. It's important that you feel comfortable and into erotic flow before transitioning to intercourse. Many women find when you guide his penis into your vagina this minimizes discomfort and increases your sense of control.
10. During intercourse, identify and make use of the positions and types of thrusting that increase comfort and pleasure.



11. When you are not aroused or experience pain, suggest engaging in an alternative sensual or sexual scenario. This can involve erotic sex (manual, oral, rubbing, vibrator stimulation); a cuddly, sensual encounter; or one-way sex where you pleasure your partner to orgasm and/or he pleases you to orgasm.

12. You have a right to veto sexual activity that is painful, but don't avoid sexual touching. Let your partner know that you value him and sexual touching, but that you feel anxiety about sexual pain.

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Avoidance increases anxiety and, over time, intensifies the problem of sexual pain. You can rebuild positive anticipation. You deserve sexual pleasure.

13. Be aware of the sexual pain cycle: anticipatory anxiety, tense and painful intercourse, followed by avoidance. Keep your focus on the cycle of positive sexual anticipation, pleasure-oriented sexual encounters, and a regular rhythm of intimate sexual experiences. Develop a variable, flexible sexual repertoire, which includes intercourse, but is not limited to intercourse.

14. Some women who experience sexual pain create a dichotomy between intercourse and nonintercourse sex. You enjoy manual/oral/rubbing/vibrator sexual expression, but are afraid of intercourse and come to view it as strictly for the man's pleasure rather than your own. Cooperate to make intercourse comfortable and pleasurable for both of you.

15. You deserve to feel comfortable with your body, with intercourse, and with erotic scenarios and techniques. Use all your resources; relaxation, lubrication, mindfulness, eroticism, transitioning to intercourse at high levels of erotic flow, and using intercourse positions and types of thrusting which facilitate pleasurable intercourse.

16. Your partner has an integral role in helping you manage pain and build sexual comfort. He is your intimate and erotic ally. Focus on sharing pleasure, not pressure or performance.

17. Your intimacy and sexual needs are as important as his. It is not healthy for you or your relationship to endure painful sex in an attempt to placate your partner.

18. Remember, few women experience desire/pleasure/eroticism/satisfaction at each sexual encounter. A healthy approach emphasizes "Good Enough Sex" (GES). With GES, approximately 85% of sexual experiences will be comfortable and enjoyable. A "perfect" performance goal of achieving 100% pain-free intercourse is self-defeating and subverts the change process.

19. Healthy sex involves desire, non-demand pleasuring, erotic scenarios and techniques, and positive, realistic expectations. Accept and enjoy the flexibility, variability, and complexity of female and couple sexuality.

**Resource: McCarthy, B. & McCarthy, E. (2012). *Sexual Awareness (5th edition)***





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