

Chapter 1

So You Want to Know More about Sex

In This Chapter

- ▶ Understanding why people have sex
 - ▶ Choosing the right partner at the right time
 - ▶ Making babies
 - ▶ Determining whether a potential partner is sex worthy
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Sex. Once you're under its power, you're a captive for life. It starts when you're young. When you're a teenager and your hormones are surging, almost everything you do is connected to sex in one way or another. And although your sexual voltage goes down a notch or two as you get older, many of your daily activities are still influenced by sex.

- ✔ You take a shower in the morning and do your hair to increase your sexual attractiveness.
- ✔ You choose clothes that will draw the attention of other people.
- ✔ You send sexual messages with your body language, from the way you walk to the angle you hold your head.

And it doesn't matter whether you're single or married, young or old, all of us are interested in how the opposite sex reacts to the image we project. We want to be noticed. We want to know that we can still attract someone, even if we've been monogamously involved in a relationship for 50 years.

In this chapter, I give you a brief course in Sex 101, so that you and I will be clear about what I mean when I talk about sex. Although sex hasn't changed much since men and women emerged from the cave, today's sexual environment is open to confusion, so this chapter covers the basics.

What Is Sex, Anyway?

Is sex just the way we differentiate ourselves, male and female? Or is it the means by which we reproduce? Is it a yearning that makes us go a bit crazy until we can satisfy those urges? Or could it be the key to exchanging extreme pleasure? Maybe it's a way of cementing a relationship. What makes sex so amazing is that it's all of those, and more.

We have special organs that are made to have sex; they fit together and have many nerve endings so as to make sex pleasurable. But sex is really a whole body experience, from your brain right down to your toes. And becoming a good sex partner means that you have to understand how to fit all those parts together. I explain the basics of the male parts in Chapter 2 and the female parts in Chapter 3. If you want to know how they fit together, turn to Chapter 8.

Every generation believes that it's the first one to have discovered the pleasures of sex, and yet none of us would be here if it weren't for the sex lives of the previous generation. Even if it's too much to imagine your parents and grandparents having sex, just give 'em a tip of the old hat.

You can have sex many different ways, and yet the outcome of sex, the satisfaction that comes from having an orgasm, is the goal of each of them. (Of course, if your only aim is to make a baby, then the pleasurable aspects become secondary.) Part of the mystery of sex is why so many paths lead to this one end. Chapters 9, 10, 13, and 14 cover different ways you can achieve orgasms.

So Why Do We Have It?

Ultimately we have sex in order to keep the human race going and to participate in a very pleasurable activity. Throughout most of mankind's history, the two were almost always linked, but today they needn't be. Being able to have an orgasm without worrying about creating a baby has changed the nature of sex, though when the two are put back together, sex reaches its greatest potential.

Making babies: A natural outcome

The English language is a rich one because it has borrowed heavily from so many different tongues. As a result, people use a variety of words to describe the same thing — especially if that thing involves sex. (I'm sure you're familiar with some of these words, but, being polite, I won't mention them.) What never ceases to amaze me, however, is how often people who engage in sexual intercourse forget that what they're doing is directly related to procreation, propagation, continuing the species, conception, pregnancy, MAKING BABIES!

Some unlucky couples must go through a great deal of trouble to have a family, and some can't manage to do it on their own at all, so they turn to medical science for help. But for most people, the process is relatively easy — at least until the baby actually arrives. The man needs only to place his erect penis into the woman's vagina and ejaculate. A baby may not result the first time — though it can — but eventually one of the man's sperm will unite with the woman's egg, and, voilà, a baby is conceived.

Because baby making can be so easy, many women find themselves pregnant without intending to be. So here's my first of many tips:



If you absolutely, positively don't want to make a baby, then don't have sexual intercourse — be abstinent.

Yes, I know there are ways of preventing pregnancy from occurring — I talk about them in Chapter 5 — but none of these methods is foolproof. Believe it or not, in at least one recorded case, the man had a vasectomy, the woman had her tubes tied, and she still became pregnant. So remember, *the only method that works 100 percent of the time is abstinence.*

The facts: Sperm and egg together

The process of making a baby has not changed since Adam and Eve discovered sex: A sperm from the man must meet an egg inside of the woman (test-tube babies notwithstanding). When the sperm and the egg unite, the egg becomes *fertilized*.

Both the sperm and the egg are very special cells; they have only half of the genetic material (*chromosomes*) that other cells have. All cells need chromosomes to provide the instructions on how to divide and create an individual.

Fertilization occurs when the chromosomes and genes from both the sperm and the egg combine to form one single cell, called a *zygote*. As a result, instead of an identical copy of one of the parents (a clone), fertilization creates a unique individual that shares features of both parents. So now you know the reason you have your father's nose and your mother's feet: At least once in their lives, your parents mingled their genetic material.

Timing the union

Female humans differ from nearly all the rest of their gender in the animal kingdom because, rather than wanting sexual intercourse only when they can conceive (that is, when they're *in heat*), women can want sexual intercourse at any time (provided they don't have a headache). Despite this difference, female humans do share with other female mammals the trait that enables them to make a baby, or *conceive*, only at certain times — in most women's cases, from one to three days a month.



Just because a woman is fertile only a few days a month, don't assume that those are the only days that unprotected sexual intercourse can make her pregnant. A woman's reproductive organs are much more complicated than that, as I explain in Chapter 3.

Unlike a man, who continually makes sperm (more than 26 trillion a year!), a woman has all her eggs already inside her at birth. These eggs — about 200,000 of them — reside in a woman's two *ovaries* (see Figure 1-1). About every 28 days, a fluid-filled sac in the ovary, called a *follicle*, releases one of the eggs. When a follicle releases an egg, many women feel a dull ache, known as *mittelschmerz*, in the area around the ovary.



Becoming aware of when *mittelschmerz* occurs is a good point of reference for anyone practicing *natural family planning*. I talk more about family planning in Chapter 5.

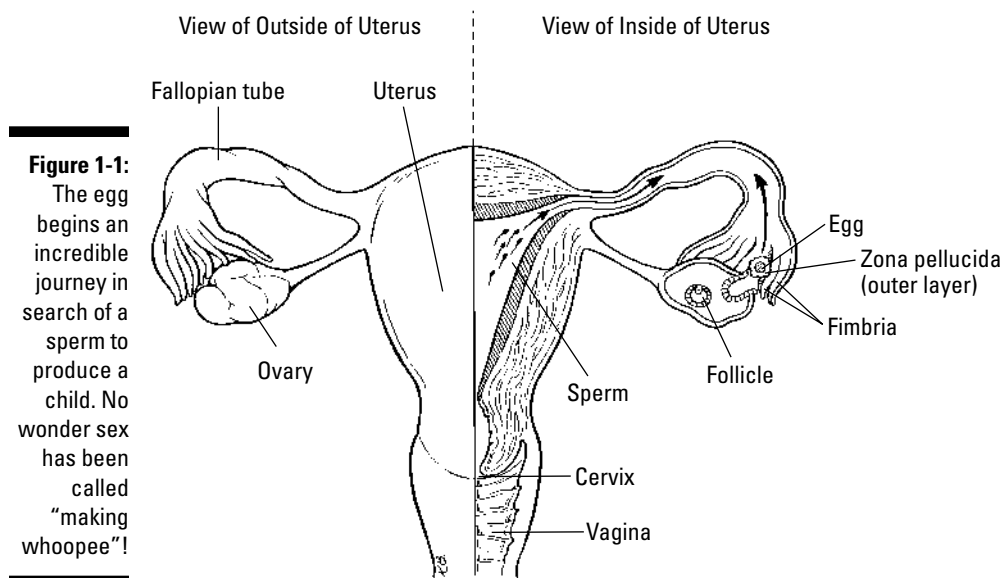


Figure 1-1:

The egg begins an incredible journey in search of a sperm to produce a child. No wonder sex has been called “making whoopee”!

Introducing the egg and sperm

Everyone's talking about what happened last night at Club Fallopian. Mr. Sperm bumped into Ms. Egg, and now they're really stuck on each other!

Just as people have to meet each other before they can form a relationship, the process of fertilization can't begin until a sperm gets up into the *fallopian tubes* and meets the egg. This introduction takes place as a result of *sexual intercourse*, which is defined as a man placing his penis in a woman's vagina. When the man has an orgasm, he releases millions of sperm into the back of the woman's vagina. These sperm bind to the cervical mucus and swim right



up through the entrance to the uterus, called the *cervix*, through the uterus itself, and then into the fallopian tubes — each sperm hunting for an egg. And if an egg happens to be floating along, the fastest sperm takes the prize.

You should always keep in mind two very important points about sperm:

- ✓ Sperm can live from two to seven days inside a woman. So although the egg may have only a short time during which it can be fertilized, sperm that a man deposited in the woman up to a week before can still fertilize the egg and cause pregnancy.
- ✓ Even before a man ejaculates, his penis releases some liquid (called *Cowper's fluid*, because the Cowper's gland produces it), which serves as a lubricant to help the sperm go up the shaft of the penis. Any sperm that may not have been ejaculated during the man's previous orgasms may be picked up by the Cowper's fluid. Although that number is less than the millions of sperm in the ejaculate, how many sperm does an egg require for fertilization? One fast one.

Because of Cowper's fluid, a man may deposit sperm inside a woman's vagina before he has an orgasm. That's why the pullout, or withdrawal, method does not work as a means of preventing pregnancy.

Going for a ride

Little finger-like appendages on the end of the fallopian tube called *fimbria* lead the egg into the tube, through which it makes its way into the *uterus*. If, during this trip, the egg encounters some sperm swimming along, then the first sperm to reach the egg and penetrate the hard outer shell, called the *zona pellucida*, will enter the egg and begin the life-creating process called fertilization.

A fertilized egg continues down the fallopian tube on a journey that takes about three days. During the first 30 hours, the chromosomes of the egg and the sperm merge, and the cells begin to divide. This new entity is called an *embryo*. When the embryo finishes its journey and enters the uterus (see Figure 1-2), it gets nourishment from uterine secretions, and the cells inside it continue to divide, causing the embryo to grow. Approximately six days after fertilization, the egg “hatches,” emerging from its hard shell and then burrowing its way into the uterine wall, or *endometrium*.



The embryo releases a hormone called hCG. When the hCG reaches the mother's bloodstream, it signals that she is pregnant and causes the ovaries to continue producing the hormones estrogen and progesterone, which are necessary to maintain the pregnancy.

If the egg is not fertilized, it passes through the uterus. About two weeks later, the uterus sheds its lining, the endometrium, in a process called *menstruation*. A new lining then begins to grow, ready to receive a fertilized egg the next month.

HOT STUFF



Making babies makes good sex, too

One more thing about sexual intercourse and its pleasures: As great a feeling as you get when having an orgasm during sexual intercourse, I think that most couples will tell you that they got even more pleasure from the intercourse they

had while trying to make a baby. You get an extra kick from knowing that the possible result of this union between two people who love each other is another little human being.

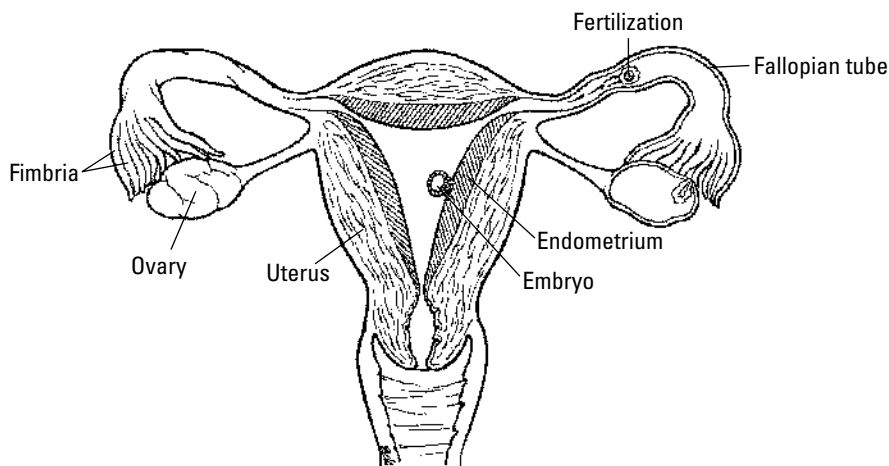


Figure 1-2:
The embryo
nests in the
wall of the
uterus after
fertilization.
Happy
landing!

Becoming a baby

After an embryo burrows its way into the endometrium, it grows until it has a human shape and all its organs — a process that takes about 12 weeks. At this point, the embryo is renamed a *fetus*.

The fetus grows inside the uterus until approximately nine months after the egg was first fertilized. Then, in a process called *giving birth*, a fully formed baby comes out of the uterus and through the vagina into the world (unless doctors have to remove the baby surgically, which is called a *cesarean section*, or c-section). If you want to know more about the specifics of pregnancy, pick up *Pregnancy For Dummies*, 2nd Edition, by Joanne Stone, M.D., Keith Eddleman, M.D., and Mary Duenwald (Wiley).

So an important possible consequence of sexual intercourse is the making of a baby that will be born nine months later. Of course, giving birth to a baby is only the beginning of providing the care a child requires. Having a child is a very big responsibility — not one to be taken lightly, and certainly not one to be ignored when having sexual intercourse.

Enjoying a sensory experience

So the mechanics of sex makes babies, but the main reason that people engage in sex is for the *sensory experience*, the wide range of physical and emotional pleasures that a person can derive from sexual activity. You may think that these pleasures would be enough to draw people into having sex, but in fact this sensory experience has two sides, like the proverbial itch that needs to be scratched. If you don't have sex for a period of time, and that period can be a matter of hours for some young adults to weeks for an older person, a little voice inside you tells you that the time for sex has arrived. You become *aroused*, or *horny* in the vernacular, meaning that as more and more time goes by, your desire for sex increases. Now, you can satisfy those desires without having sex with another person, called *masturbation*, which I cover in Chapter 14, but the preferable method of scratching this itch is to have sex with another person.

If a child wakes up in the middle of the night at an inopportune time, that is to say when his or her parents are having sex, the child is going to hear what may appear to be some very frightening sounds. But the very intense nature of those sounds is proof of how strong the sensory experience can be. Nothing surpasses the enjoyment that sex can bring.

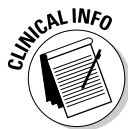
Because the real center of all this pleasure takes place in the brain, it's important to understand the process because here's a case where the more you know, the better the results can be.

Understanding the Ins and Outs of the Sexual Response Cycle

The reason that sex therapists such as myself exist is due in great part to Dr. William Masters and Dr. Virginia Johnson, who studied the sexual response cycle in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

How did they study the sexual response cycle? They observed more than 10,000 sexual acts in their laboratories. Because even the most serious voyeur would probably have had enough after about the first 1,000, you can appreciate that they were really very dedicated scientists.

And scientists they were, because when I say *observe*, I don't just mean watch. The people who took part in these studies were wired up so Masters and Johnson could tell exactly what was going on, including how much lubrication the woman made and the quantity of ejaculate the man released.



As a result of these studies, Masters and Johnson came up with four distinct phases for human sexual response. Later, Dr. Helen Singer Kaplan, under whom I trained, created her own model, which included elements of Masters and Johnson's phases as well as one of her own.

Examining an individual's *sexual response cycle* is integral to the diagnosis that sex therapists make of anyone who comes to them with a sexual problem. Understanding the various categories of the sexual response cycle can also help you to become the best possible lover, so read the following definitions very carefully.

- ✓ **Sexual Desire Phase:** The Sexual Desire Phase, sometimes called the *libido*, precedes actual physical or psychological stimulation. This part of the model is Dr. Kaplan's alone. Dr. Kaplan observed that certain chemicals in the body (primarily *testosterone* — the male sex hormone, which is also present in females) trigger these inner sexual feelings. Sexual excitement builds upon these feelings.

Dr. Kaplan examined and labeled this phase because of her work in sexual therapy, where she noted that some people's desire for sex was so low that they rarely or never reached the other phases of the cycle. Only by studying what was going on in this earlier stage could she discover what was causing their difficulties.

- ✓ **Excitement Phase:** The Excitement Phase arises when the genitals experience *vasocongestion*, which is a swelling caused by an increase in blood filling the tissues.

In men, this excitement leads to an erection. In women, this excitement leads to a swelling of the clitoris and vaginal lips, increased vaginal lubrication, increased breast size, and erection of the nipples. Other physical signs of this phase include increased heartbeat, breathing rate, and blood pressure. Arm and leg muscles may begin to tense; some people experience a "sex flush" on the upper abdomen that may spread to the chest area.

This phase is usually generated by one or a combination of several physical, visual, or psychological stimuli, which can be caused either by oneself or a partner. Foreplay (which I cover in Chapter 7) usually gets these responses started.

- ✓ **Plateau Phase:** In the Plateau Phase, certain aspects of the Excitement Phase reach a slightly higher level, with tensions building.

According to Masters and Johnson, men exhibit two physical signs during this period:

- First, a few droplets of fluid are released at the head of the penis to act as a lubricant for the sperm. (These droplets, released by the Cowper's gland, may also contain sperm left in the urethra from





earlier ejaculations, which is what makes the withdrawal method so risky. Chapter 5 gives more information on the pitfalls of the so-called pullout method of birth control.)

- Also, the man's testes enlarge and are pulled closer to the body.

Dr. Kaplan incorporates all of these reactions of the Plateau Phase as an extension of the Excitement Phase because the individual doesn't sense any difference between the Excitement and Plateau stages, making these subtle differences of no value to her in treating a sexual dysfunction.

- ✓ **Orgasm Phase:** During the Orgasm Phase, in both men and women, your body goes through a whole series of muscular contractions and spasms, including facial contortions, an increased respiratory rate and heartbeat, and a further increase in blood pressure. Your genitals also experience strong contractions. (For more about having an orgasm, read Chapter 10.)

The man undergoes the further contraction of ejaculation, which occurs in two stages: the moment of inevitability, characterized by sensations that mark the so-called point of no return (which I talk more about in Chapter 20), followed immediately by ejaculation.

- ✓ **Resolution Phase:** In this last phase (which only Masters and Johnson include), the body slowly returns to normal — the physical conditions that existed before the Excitement Stage began. This Resolution Phase is much longer for women than for men, making it the basis for afterplay (which is the topic of Chapter 11).

In addition, men have the *refractory period*, which is the time needed after orgasm before the man can respond to more sexual stimulation and have another erection and orgasm. In young men, this period can be as short as a few minutes; the length of the refractory period grows as a man ages.



The man reaches the Excitement Phase much more quickly than the woman, and the woman has a much longer Resolution Phase. I suggest extending foreplay as much as possible to help compensate for this difference.

Partnering Up

People's appetite for sex builds as time goes on, as I mentioned in the "Enjoying a sensory experience" section earlier in this chapter, but people have another need, and that is to form a bond with another person. It seems we are made to go by twos, the way the animals marched into Noah's ark. The biological reason may be to bring up the children produced by sex, but we wouldn't need love and romance if that were the only case. We also need companionship, someone to share our lives with, as well as to have sex.

For love and the long haul

When men were hunter-gatherers, you needed two people to raise a family, but today, the millions of single parents prove that one person can bring up children. But while sociological changes have taken place that promote people remaining single, the drive to find someone to love remains a strong one. The drive is so strong that many people who get divorced don't give up on the institution of marriage but may undergo this rite again and again. Hope springs eternal that we will all find our true love, and that's because we all feel the need to share our lives with another person.

With so many people all around us, it becomes almost inevitable that someone seeking love will find someone else with whom to share that love. Yes, love can be blind and sometimes you choose the wrong person, but more often than not, if love doesn't last it's because the two people didn't know about the care that love needs. And part of the glue that holds love together is sex, and so the more you know about sex, the greater success you'll have in love. I give you suggestions on finding a partner in Chapter 4, and if you're in a long-term relationship and want to add some excitement to your sex life, I wrote Chapters 12 and 22 for you.

For lust and the fun of it all

While sex improves love, and vice versa, sex can certainly exist without love. One-night stands may have inherent dangers, but they can also be quite pleasurable. And having sex with a person for the first time always heightens the experience. It comes from a mixture of curiosity (What does he or she look like naked?), fear (Will I satisfy this person?), lust (I don't want all the entanglements of a relationship, I just want sex.), and selfishness (This one's for me.).

However, one-night stands have a way of becoming two nights. Separating our arousal from the rest of our emotions isn't always easy. Some people these days engage in sex with people who are just friends, sharing "benefits." If that happens once, then perhaps that's as far as it will go. But if two friends are having sex with some regularity, the odds are pretty good that at least one of them will want to be more than just friends.

Flying solo

Of course, if the urge to have sex becomes too strong, and no partner is available, then sexual satisfaction can be found through self-pleasuring or masturbation. To some degree, an orgasm is an orgasm. Masturbating does bring relief from sexual tension. Sex with a partner can add many more nuances to the overall pleasure of the act, but there's no doubt that masturbation can be better than nothing.

Masturbation is also safer than sex with some stranger, though it's not without any dangers. You need some sexual tension in your life, especially if you're very busy, in order to motivate yourself to go out and find a partner. If you use up all of your sexual energy masturbating, especially if you do it so often that you have little or no time for any type of social life, then masturbation can wind up being a trap that can be hard to get out of. But if you're in need of relief, then turning to masturbation can be a life-saver. I talk more about masturbation in Chapter 14.

Playing It Safe

If you've read this far, it should be pretty clear to you that engaging in sexual intercourse with someone of the opposite sex could lead to an unintended pregnancy. You can avoid that occurrence, but you have to be prepared. Knowing about condoms and birth control pills won't help you if you're in the heat of passion with someone else, especially if you're both partially or fully undressed. Contraception isn't difficult but it takes some planning. The most reliable methods of preventing pregnancy require a visit to a doctor or clinic. Others necessitate at least a trip to the drugstore. All of this has to happen before you're anywhere near ready to have sex.

Deciding which contraceptive to use takes some thinking. And these days, because of sexually transmitted diseases, you may choose to use more than one, because not every birth control method protects against STDs. If you have no desire to cause a pregnancy, please read Chapter 5 carefully so that you'll be prepared when the time comes to have sex. (And if you're worried about STDs, please read Chapter 19 as well.)

Adjusting Over Time

We use the word sex to describe what two people do when aroused over their entire lifetime, but that doesn't mean that sex remains constant. Young people, whose hormones are just kicking in, will feel the effect more intensely than older people. This lessening of sexual energy isn't just because an older person has had sex thousands of more times than a young person, but also because of physical changes that everyone undergoes. But the more you know about those changes, the better you'll be able to handle them so that your sex life can continue unabated until you reach 99. If you're young and just starting your sexual journey, Chapter 6 is a good roadmap for what's ahead. And if you're at an age when you're starting to hit some speed bumps on the journey, Chapters 17, 20, and 21 will help smooth out the ride.

Of course, your sex life can receive a negative impact in ways other than the normal aging process. The longer we live, the greater the odds that fate will throw us a curve or two. The onset of one disease or another can change the way you have sex. But again, it doesn't necessarily mean that your sex life is over, only that some adjustments will be needed. Want to know what those adjustments are? Turn to Chapter 18.

Most young people find it hard to believe that their parents still have sex, no less their grandparents, but it's true. Our looks may change, even our desires, but sex is an integral part of our humanity, and it remains so throughout our lives.

Are You Ready to Get Busy?

In a classic episode of *Seinfeld*, Elaine had a limited supply of the contraceptive sponge and therefore had to decide whether or not a potential partner was "sponge worthy," that is to say worthy of using one of her precious sponges to have sex with him. So how do you decide whether someone you're considering having sex with is worthy of doing the deed with you? Here are some possible questions you may ask yourself. There are no right or wrong answers here, but if the overall tone of your answers skews toward the negative, then my advice is not to hop into bed with this person, at least not until you get to know this person a bit better.

- ✔ What parts of me does this person activate? My head? My heart? My loins? Two out of three? One out of three?
- ✔ Will I want to keep the lights off, so this person doesn't see the parts of me I don't like, or on, so I can see all of this other person?
- ✔ I could use a shower. Will this person care? After getting undressed, will I care?
- ✔ Where do I see us as a couple one month from now? Six months from now? Ten years from now?
- ✔ If something goes wrong and neither one of us has an orgasm, will I ever want to see this person again?
- ✔ What will I think about myself in the morning?