Can a man tell if a woman orgasms? [1]

Dear Alice,

I was wondering if it were possible for a man to tell if a woman has had an orgasm. If so, how noticeable is it to a man and is there a substantial amount of fluid involved in a woman's orgasm?

— an uniformed pre-orgasmic

Answer

Dear an uniformed pre-orgasmic,

In response to the age-old question, "Which came first: the chicken or the egg?" consider this: how do you know that either came at all? Jokes aside, the best way to determine if a partner has reached orgasm is to ask them. Keeping communication open during sexual encounters not only clarifies whether a partner has orgasmed, but it may also make for more fulfilling experiences and climaxes for all parties involved. That being said, there isn’t really a telltale sign that someone has reached the big O other than asking — there’s no consistent physical reaction related to fluid release that indicates an orgasm, as it can vary from person-to-person. It’s also worth noting that while reaching orgasm may be the goal for some, others may find more pleasure in simply taking in the sexual experience. Read on for more information about orgasms and to know if a partner has experienced one.

While there’s no way to know whether someone has orgasmed without asking or being told, understanding some common physiological reactions may offer clues as to whether you’ve witnessed the big O. Usually, during an orgasm the person has an intense pleasurable feeling that spreads throughout the body. This is often accompanied by muscle contractions near the genitals, an increased heart rate and breathing, and sometimes a fluid release which differs slightly based on sex assigned at birth. It’s also common for the clitoris [2] or head of the penis [3] to be sensitive to the touch. Other physical symptoms could include looking flushed, particularly around the chest, neck, and face. Some people may even feel more relaxed, sleepy, or happy following an orgasm because of the release of endorphins, neurotransmitters that increase positive feelings. While these are some physiological reactions that can happen during an orgasm, the experience likely varies from person to person and by sexual encounter. For more information on ins and outs of orgasms, check out Go Ask Alice! Sexual & Reproductive Health [4]
Regardless of whether or not the changes or functions of a partner during sex are noticeable, it’s a good idea to have constant communication before, during, and after sexual activity. Before engaging in sexual activity, it’s wise to have a conversation with your partner about what feels good, what activities they are and aren’t comfortable with, and whether or not they’ve experienced an orgasm before, or if orgasming is even their goal (which it may not be — and that’s okay!). During sexual activity, you might consider asking your partner if they’re enjoying themselves or if one of you needs to shift angles or positions for maximum pleasure. You might also pay attention to their body language to assess if your partner is enjoying themselves, keeping in mind that everyone experiences pleasure differently and it may not look or be experienced the same every time or even within the same encounter. Afterward, you might ask your partner about their experience and share your own. Opening up this conversation shows that you care about making them feel good, but it also makes space for you to engage in dialogue about what each partner does and doesn’t like, which can improve the experience for all involved. You may find it helpful to have a starting point — Scarleteen’s Sexual Inventory Stocklist [5] is a great resource to help partners communicate about what they do or don’t want in sexual experiences.

Remember: what makes someone orgasm one day may not do so the next. The same goes for how a person experiences an orgasm; a release of fluid once doesn't mean it'll happen the next time. Additionally, orgasm isn't what some are trying to achieve during sexual activity and that a fulfilling sex experience can be had whether or not orgasms occur. Learning what excites a partner may require experimenting though trial and error. For more information, check out the Go Ask Alice! Orgasms [6] section in the Sexual and Reproductive Health [4] archives.

Alice!
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Resources
Safer Sex Map (Morningside/ Barnard) [12]
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