Dear Alice,

Are there biological differences in orgasms between women and men?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Oh, oh, oh… no? Though much has been said about men’s versus women’s ability to orgasm, there seems to be a growing consensus that there are no major biological differences between their respective orgasms. For the majority of people, orgasms are characterized by a contraction of pelvic floor muscles, intense pleasurable sensation, release of endorphins and hormones, and for some, the release of fluids (though the amount can vary). During climax, people may notice differences in their breathing, feelings of warmth, sweating, body vibrations, altered consciousness, and a desire to moan to express their pleasure — these are not dependent on sex assigned at birth. It’s also key to mention that what is currently understood about orgasms is based on research that is focused on those assigned male or female at birth (e.g., when “woman” is used, the research is referring to someone who was assigned female at birth and identifies as a woman). However, rather than differing by sex assigned at birth, the frequency and ability to orgasm, as well as the perceived experience, are more likely to differ by individuals. With that in mind, research does indicate that there’s an orgasm gap — where those with a penis generally experience more orgasms than those with a vagina due to anatomical and sociocultural reasons, particularly during opposite-sex experiences. Keep reading for more on the factors that influence those differences.

While there aren’t biological differences in orgasmic sensations, there are anatomical differences that may impact a person’s ability to orgasm frequently. For example, people with longer distances between their clitoris and opening of the urethra are less likely to achieve orgasms with penis-in-vagina (PIV) penetrative sex, as compared to people with shorter distances between the two. What’s more, while folks with a penis are less likely to experience an inability to orgasm, there are those with a vagina who climax more than their partner. Likewise, there are people with a penis who achieve multiple orgasms, a feat commonly thought to occur only for those with vaginas.
People may mistakenly believe that sex assigned at birth influences orgasms because of perceived or expected gender performance in orgasmic behavior. For example, in some cultures, women are expected to be more vocal during orgasm, but this is not likely a biological reflex. A “screamer” might not be having an orgasm, just as a silent lover might be having multiple. So where do such expectations originate? Beliefs about a person’s sexuality can come from varieties of sources — both scientific and cultural — and can largely influence people’s ideas of what orgasms “should” be like. Thus, it’s really sociocultural factors, not sex assigned at birth, that may commonly influence how orgasms are "performed." Why? Researchers suggest that it could be due to how women perceive themselves and their roles in the bedroom. To understand that in more detail, it’s good to point out that society tends to place greater emphasis on men’s sexual gratification than on women’s — with numerous media depictions eluding that sex ends when a man “cums” or ejaculates (specific to heterosexual encounters). Subsequently, women in heterosexual relationships may tend give more sexual pleasure than they receive. However, heterosexual women report struggling to achieve orgasm through PIV sex alone and may rely on additional stimulation such as oral sex or manual stimulation of the clitoris to reach orgasm. Additionally, women report having greater body-image issues so may not feel comfortable enough to “let loose” during sex.

Studies have also looked at how sexual identity could play a role in a person's ability to orgasm frequently. In multiple studies, when compared to heterosexual women, lesbian women reported experiencing more orgasms and more sexual pleasure. Researchers have posed that this may be because their partners better understand how to sexually please them. Unlike many heterosexual men, lesbian women may be more likely to understand that orgasms in women are not primarily achieved through penetrative sex. Interestingly, while there are differences between heterosexual and lesbian women in the scientific literature, there are no noted significant differences between the frequencies with which men who identify as straight, gay, or bisexual experience orgasms, despite their varying sexual identities.

Given all of this, researchers do have a few suggestions about addressing the orgasm gap between men and women. Addressing the sociocultural factors that inhibit women in the bedroom may be one place to start. This might be done by educating the public with knowledge about how to enhance women’s sexual pleasure, as well as encouraging to learn what makes them and their partner(s) happy in the bedroom. And, while much emphasis is put on achieving orgasms, it’s good to keep in mind that they aren’t the only way to experience sexual satisfaction — nor are they essential to have a pleasurable experience. In fact, for those who experience sexual dysfunction, climaxing may be more difficult or not possible. Redirecting the focus of sexual encounters to simply enjoying sensations and the experience as a whole may open the door for a more expansive definition of pleasure and satisfaction.

At the end of the day, it’s helpful to remember that orgasms are highly subjective and individual experiences. When it comes to orgasms and sexual pleasure, there is no one formula or sure-fire strategy — and that’s the fun and thrilling part about it! For more information on this phenomenon, check out the Orgasms [2] tab in the Go Ask Alice! archives.

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