

10 ways the foods you eat can affect your sex life

In the run-up to Valentine's Day, you may see a lot of "listicle" articles like "Top Ten Aphrodisiac Foods" or "Eight Foods That Can Super-Charge Your Sex Life."

In the spirit of Intelligent Medicine, let's perform a reality check on some of these claims.

Sexual Superfood lists often include oysters. They're suggestively slimy, and rich in zinc. But contrary to urban legend, zinc doesn't boost your sex drive; it's just that profound zinc deficiency can hamper sexual maturation and result in infertility. But if you were THAT zinc deficient, probably the last thing you'd be thinking about is sex.

Another purported Sexual Superfood is asparagus. But other than its suggestive shape, there's little to recommend it. Form does NOT follow function here!



Some lists tout "prairie oysters"—literally bull testicles. But oral testosterone, even if there's some left over after cooking, is not well absorbed. That's why oral anabolic steroids are synthetic conjugates, not bio-identical.

Chocolate makes most lists, partially because it makes a delicious, precious gift that's a sensuous delight. It beats flowers or a greeting card as an invitation to dalliance. But chocolate deserves serious consideration as an aphrodisiac on several counts. It contains PEA—phenylethylamine—a brain neurotransmitter associated with "limerance," the feeling of being infatuated.

Additionally, chocolate contains healthy polyphenols that promote circulation, a prerequisite for . . . well, you know what. Chocolate also contains theobromine, a substance that produces feelings of relaxation and well-being. Nonetheless, research that supports an actual effect of chocolate on sex drive is scant.

So, what are some plausible ways your diet can support—or subvert—your sex life?

Here are my top 10!

1) Eating too much/obesity: Eating too much high-calorie food promotes obesity, which is known to deplete testosterone. Fat acts like a sponge for testosterone. For some of my male patients, simply losing a dozen pounds of abdominal fat allows their testosterone to re-enter their circulation and normalize their blood levels.

Besides, excess body fat is generally associated with lowered self-image, decreased stamina, and compromised flexibility, which assuredly put a damper on sex.

2) Insulin resistance: Defined as the inability to process carbohydrates efficiently, insulin resistance is a precursor to diabetes, and may occur in up to 40% of American adults. In men, insulin resistance is often associated with low testosterone. Exercise, a low-carb diet, and insulin-sensitizing supplements like magnesium, chromium, berberine, and Omega 3s help counteract it.

3) Pro-inflammatory diet: Recent studies demonstrate that the Mediterranean Diet confers protection against erectile dysfunction. Why? In addition to having a low glycemic index, the Mediterranean Diet is chock full of anti-inflammatory polyphenols from olives, fresh fruits and vegetables, and red wine, as well as Omega 3 fats from fish. These nutrients preserve healthy circulation—in the heart, brain, and all the right places.

In contradistinction, fast food diets are laden with poor quality trans-fats and Omega 6 oils, refined sugar and starches, artificial chemicals, and heat-damaged proteins—a pro-inflammatory load.

4) Caloric insufficiency: Just as caloric excess can dampen sexuality, so too can inadequate food intake. Scrimping on calories, overzealous dieting or fasting can cause the body to go into survival mode (sex optional!).

5) Macronutrient ratios: Beyond overall caloric restriction, ultra-low fat diets and/or protein restriction can impair sex hormone production. A diet consisting exclusively of brown rice and seaweed could put your bedroom activities on hold!

6) Dietary nitrites: NO means YES! when it comes to sex. Dietary nitrates and nitrites—plentiful in beets, arugula, and celery—are building blocks for NO (nitric oxide). NO dilates blood vessels, promoting circulation. Erectile dysfunction drugs are all potent inducers of nitric oxide.

7) Vegan vs. Omnivore: Studies have measured testosterone and estrogen levels in committed vegans vs. consumers of moderate amounts of animal protein. They reveal that vegans have lower levels of sex hormones. This may confer protection against prostate, breast and uterine cancers, but could tip the balance toward tepid desire.

8) Intermittent fasting: While prolonged bouts of fasting can kill your sex drive and performance, short foodless intervals can rev hormone production, according to studies. Try to give your system a reset by avoiding late night eating and schedule a couple days per week for light eating (see 5:2 Diet).

9) Alcohol +/-: Research shows that moderate drinkers (1-2 drinks/day) have slightly higher hormone levels than teetotalers. But while booze may seem to grease the skids for romance, a reverse effect kicks in with > 2 drinks per day. Alcoholism is notorious for depleting testosterone in men.

10) Soy: Controversy rages over the impact of soy consumption on sex hormone levels—some say it's protective against reproductive cancers; others contend it may stoke them. Limited data suggest that consumption of very large amounts of soy could have an estrogenic effect, which could impact men's sexual performance. Modest consumption appears to be inconsequential.

Enjoy your Valentine's Day, and use these guidelines to make sure your diet helps—not hinders—your romantic endeavors.