

Sexual Health Week 2015

14 – 20 September



The Pleasure Principle

Sexual Health Week 2015 is all about sexual pleasure and wellbeing. It is a topic that may not come up very often in your clinic, surgery or pharmacy, but it should not be overlooked. The World Health Organisation's working definition of sexual health specifies that it is not just the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity, but also requires the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences.

In June we launched FPA Pleasure (www.fpapleasure.co.uk), an online shop selling sex toys and accessories in the style of a lifestyle magazine - full of informative and supportive articles and blog posts. Our research in the run up to opening the shop, and feedback we have had since, has confirmed that talking about enjoying sex remains a source of embarrassment for many people in the UK.

This is despite the fact that most sex takes place for reasons of pleasure, intimacy and desire rather than just reproduction, and we know that sex has a vital role to play in people's overall feelings of health and wellbeing. As well as being pleasurable, an active sex life is a good form of exercise, reduces stress, aids relaxation and sleep, is a good pain reliever and keeps the prostate gland and genitals healthy.

What is the role of health professionals in pleasure?

Your role is key in breaking down the stigma and taboos that still surround enjoying sex and masturbation, but it is not always easy if patients or customers bottle up their problems, or struggle to talk openly with a trusted family doctor or pharmacist.

A recent survey by Ovarian Cancer Action found that 66% of 18 to 24-year-old and 11% of over 65-year-old women said they would be shy saying 'vagina' to a healthcare professional. There was also embarrassment about using the word 'orgasm'.

Normalising conversations about sex – not just when there is a problem – and talking about pleasure and wellbeing as integral parts of sexual health, will help to break down barriers.

It is crucial not to make assumptions about the patients or customers you work with, especially because of their age. Over the years we have heard from people in their 80s and 90s enjoying active sex lives. Likewise, we know many young people experience periods of sexual dysfunction.

It is also important to be mindful of people's right to enjoy sex being ignored – for example because they have a physical or learning disability, live with HIV, have or are recovering from a life-changing or limiting illness, have experienced rape or sexual violence, are LGB or T. Often the people whose needs and wants are most overlooked are those who need extra support to make the choices that are right for them. Try not to shy away from tackling this, because you could make a huge difference to someone's life.

Practical tips for working sex-positively

You may not have had any training around discussing the pleasure side of sex, but there are lots of things that you can do to make the process easier for both yourself and the patients and customers you care for. Using Sexual Health Week as a hook for conversations can help get you started.

- When possible, include discussions around sexual pleasure and wellbeing in whole team briefings, so everyone has a chance to suggest ideas or work through concerns. If one of the team has a particular interest, they could become the pharmacy, practice or clinic's "Sexual Health Champion", leading on initiatives and sharing best practice.
- Create a welcoming atmosphere for patients or customers, including displaying information about sexual wellbeing and relationships. Include posters which tell patients that they can ask about any aspect of their sexual health and sex life in confidence and with privacy.
- From the resources you make available (leaflets, posters, postcards) through to the way staff are trained to interact with patients, ensure the practice gives a sense of approachability and openness. Some people fear they will be judged or made to feel 'dirty' in a health setting and it is important they feel supported.
- Use other opportunities to bring up issues around sex and sexual health – this can be during routine health checks, post-natal checks, treatment for serious and chronic conditions, or when prescribing a medication which can have an impact on sexual function. Sometimes when a person is dealing with an illness they unquestioningly accept an impact on their sex life as a bi-product, when there may actually be an effective treatment available.
- Don't work in isolation, especially if you are inexperienced in sexual health or offer limited services. Contact and link in with other services in your area which provide support around sex and relationships. Not only will you be able to share ideas, but you can signpost patients on to more specialist help if needed. This could be clinical or community-based services or support networks.
- Share www.fpapleasure.co.uk with your patients or customers, colleagues and within your networks. Backed up by FPA's trusted and evidence-based information, FPA Pleasure has a growing collection of articles on sexual pleasure.

Further resources

Visit www.fpa.org.uk/shw15 for further information and more practical tips, including example sentence starters you can use with patients or customers.

Our training team runs a variety of open courses, listed at www.fpa.org.uk/training, as well as designing tailored courses to meet your individual needs.

Contact training@fpa.org.uk for more information.