Orgasms, sexual health and attitudes about female genitals

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Debby Herbenick is associate director of the Center for Sexual Health Promotion in the School of Health, Physical Education and Recreation at Indiana University. Credit: Indiana University

An Indiana University study published in the September issue of the *International Journal of Sexual Health* found that women who feel more positively about women's genitals find it easier to orgasm and are more likely to engage in sexual health promoting behaviors, such as having regular gynecological exams or performing vulvar self-examinations.

"These are important findings about body image," said Debby

Herbenick, associate director of the Center for Sexual Health Promotion in the School of Health, Physical Education and Recreation. "Our culture often portrays women's genitals as dirty and in need of cleaning and grooming. Some women may have had greater exposure to such negative messages or may be more susceptible to their impact."

Herbenick's study created a scale for measuring men's and women's attitudes toward women's genitals. Such a scale, she wrote in the study, could be useful in sex therapy, in medical settings to help better understand decision-making that goes into gynecological care and treatment, and in health education settings involving women and their sexual health. The study also found that men had more positive attitudes about women's genitals than women.

"Women are often more critical about their own bodies -- and other women's bodies -- than men are," Herbenick said. "What we found in this study is that men generally feel positive about a variety of aspects of women's genitals including how they look, smell, taste and feel."

Herbenick, also a sexual health educator for The Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction, offers the following suggestions regarding the findings:

- Body image. Parents might consider how they can help their daughters to feel more positively about their bodies, such as by teaching them accurate names for their body parts, including their genitals (e.g., "vulva" rather than "down there") and responding in supportive ways to their self-exploration. "Rather than saying, 'don't touch down there -- it's dirty,' parents might let their children know that it's OK for them to touch their genitals, but in private spaces such as their own bedroom or the bathroom," Herbenick said.

- Advertisements and marketing. Health educators might consider ways that they can teach women and men about their bodies in positive, sex-positive ways by openly discussing how some products or marketing campaigns make people feel about their bodies.

The survey component of the study involved 362 women and 241 men, most of whom were white/Caucasian and between the ages of 18 and 23.

"Our study builds on previous research that demonstrates that the mind and body are highly connected in regard to sex," said Herbenick. "When women feel more positively about female genitals, they likely feel more relaxed in their own skin, more able to let go and thus more likely to experience pleasure and orgasm."

More information: "The Development and Validation of a Scale to Measure Attitudes Toward Women's Genitals," *International Journal of* Sexual Health, 21:153-166, 2009.

Source: Indiana University (news : web)

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