



Difference between clitoral and vaginal orgasm

Question

Dear Alice,

What's the difference between a vaginal and clitoral orgasm? Is it only possible to have a vaginal orgasm during intercourse? If you can have a clitoral orgasm through other activity, but not intercourse, why is that? If your clitoris is stimulated during intercourse, will that give you a clitoral orgasm during sex? So how do you have a vaginal one? Can you have both at the same time?

—Cumming

Answer

Dear Cumming,

Oh, oh, baby! There are many factors that contribute to how an orgasm feels. One variable is the type of physical stimulation, and to what body parts. A “vaginal orgasm” is the notion that women can have an orgasm through stimulation during intercourse or other vaginal penetration, entirely without clitoral stimulation. However, the vagina has few nerve endings, and therefore cannot create an orgasm on its own. Instead of thinking of the vagina and clitoris as separate entities, try thinking about them as a network of nerves and muscles.

In reality, total separation between the vagina and clitoris is mostly artificial, and often based on a misunderstanding of what, where, and how big the clitoris really is. The clitoral organ system actually surrounds the vagina, urethra and anus. Rather than thinking of an orgasm as “vaginal” or “clitoral”, it makes more sense to think of orgasm in terms of the feelings that came along with it. In the end, an orgasm is an orgasm is an orgasm!

Here’s a little bit of history for you: Sigmund Freud made a pronouncement that the “mature” woman has orgasms only when her vagina, but not her clitoris, is stimulated — this is commonly referred to as the “vaginal orgasm”. The emphasis on stimulation from penetration made the man's penis central to a woman's sexual satisfaction. It is important to emphasize that Freud did not base his theory upon a study of woman's anatomy, but rather upon his assumptions of woman as inferior to men.

Back to the basics, stimulating the clitoris and (for some women) pressure in or around the vagina can cause pelvic fullness and body tension to build up to a peak. During sexual excitement, the clitoris swells and changes position. The blood vessels through the whole pelvic area also swell, causing engorgement and a feeling of fullness and sexual sensitivity. The inner vaginal lips swell and change shape, and the vagina balloons upward, causing the uterus to shift position. Orgasm is the point at which all the tension is suddenly released in a series of involuntary and pleasurable muscular contractions in the vagina, uterus, and/or rectum.

You or a partner can stimulate your clitoris in a number of different ways — by rubbing, sucking, body pressure, or using a vibrator. Although some women touch the glans of the clitoris to become aroused, for others it can be so sensitive that direct touching hurts, even with lubrication. Also, focusing directly on the clitoris for a long time may cause the pleasurable sensations to disappear. Your clitoris can also be stimulated during sexual intercourse, most often with the woman on top — this happens when the clitoris is rubbed against the man's pubic bone. It can also be achieved when the man is on top if the man positions himself high enough so that his pubic bone presses against his partner's clitoral area. You or your partner can also stimulate your clitoris with fingers during intercourse to help bring you to orgasm.

Aside from clitoral stimulation, it is important to remember another major organ involved with orgasm — the brain! Emotions, perceptions, memories, and senses determine how we experience sex, rather than past experiences or physical appearance alone. Mental (cortical) stimulation, where the imagination stimulates the brain, can actually help set off an orgasm. Relaxing and concentrating on sensations (rather than worrying about how you're doing) can help your brain process your pleasure.

Overall, orgasms are a very individualistic thing — there is no one correct pattern of sexual response. Whatever works, feels good, and makes you feel more alive and connected with your body (and partner if you have one) are what count!

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