

Fueling Desire: Aphrodisiacs and Scents that Charge Libido

*“Anyone who believes that the way to a man’s heart
is through his stomach flunked geography.”*

—ROBERT BYRNE

DEBBIE AND HER HUSBAND, Ron, needed a getaway, a chance to reconnect with each other as a couple, far from the hectic pace of their lives. So they arranged a date night that included dining at one of their favorite restaurants, with a nice fireplace and an ambiance they both enjoyed. After glancing at the menu, Ron reached for Debbie’s hand, squeezed it, and in an enticing voice, asked, “Feel like oysters tonight, honey?”

“Trying to get me in the mood?” Debbie teased. As she reflected on their opportunity to be together, she replied seductively, “Okay. Oysters are my favorite aphrodisiac, too! Let’s order some.”

Aphrodisiacs: Fact or Fiction?

It’s a common notion that oysters will help get your sexual juices flowing. But do oysters and other aphrodisiacs—foods that are thought to increase sexual desire—really work? Is it true that the properties and smell of certain foods can put you “in the mood”?

The word *aphrodisiac* derives from the name of the Greek goddess of love, Aphrodite. For centuries, people have been searching for magical foods that will stimulate sexual desire and enhance performance. Some aphrodisiacs have gained their reputation from their shape or appearance, such as avocados and oysters. Others are mixed together to create love potions, such as those that have been derived from various animal parts. One recipe includes rams’ testicles combined with honey and ground-up rhinoceros horn! Other animal-based aphrodisiacs gain

their reputation from the apparent virility of the animal source, such as the tiger penis. Turtle eggs, eaten raw with lime juice and salt, are also claimed to be strong aphrodisiacs. Sadly, tigers, rhinoceroses, and many turtles are now becoming extinct precisely because people use them for their purported aphrodisiac qualities.

Are We Having Enough Sex?

According to the global study Durex World Sex Survey,¹ we are having sex:

103 times per year, or
1.98 times per week, or
0.28 times per day, or
0.012 times an hour, or
0.00019 times per
minute!

Considering that sex is one of the most pleasurable, natural, and healthful activities we can engage in, these statistics seem a little low. Could it be that we aren't eating enough libido-boosting foods?

Just because an animal has a reputation for being virile or sports a phallic-looking horn certainly doesn't support the claims that eating it will enhance your sexual prowess. So, are all aphrodisiacs a hoax? Or is it possible that valid medical science actually supports the theory that certain foods or chemicals can increase sexual desire? And, if so, how do they work?

There are legitimate aphrodisiacs that work by interacting with our own hormonal processes. As we now know, the main operating hormone in women is estrogen, and in men, testosterone, although other hormones, including progesterone, thyroid, and DHEA, are also involved. The unique interaction and balance among these hormones can unlock one of the keys to understanding sexual desire. Given the correct balance of hormones, sexual stimuli pass to the pleasure center of the brain, or limbic system. The limbic system then sends signals to the nervous system and on to the pelvic region, causing blood vessels in the genital region to dilate. In men, the result of this blood

vessel dilation is an erection. In women, female erectile tissues—such as the clitoris—are stimulated, resulting in increased lubrication of the vagina, an increased heart rate, breast/nipple erection, and greater blood flow to the vaginal area. Due to the simultaneous release of neurotransmitters from the brain, particularly norepinephrine and dopamine, messages of pleasure and arousal are emitted throughout our bodies.

So, can any of these reactions be obtained by eating certain foods or even by smelling specific scents? The answer is both yes and no.

*“Sex is one of the nine reasons for reincarnation . . .
The other eight are unimportant.”*

—HENRY MILLER

Food Aphrodisiacs

While a romantic candlelit dinner with soft music won't hurt to get us in the mood, eating certain foods can indeed foster a desire for intimacy and play a major part in our sexuality. Research has shown that some of the best-known edible aphrodisiacs do in fact contain certain vitamins and minerals that contribute to a healthy reproductive system—and perhaps a healthy libido. Medical science can't guarantee that ingesting these foods will increase your desire—and certainly what works for one person may not work for another—but it could be a lot of fun for you and your partner to experiment with these tasty treats. Barring any food allergies, I highly recommend that your next romantic dinner include some of these items:

Almonds/nuts: A symbol of fertility throughout the ages, they are a prime source of essential fatty acids, providing building blocks for hormone production. The aroma of almonds is purported to arouse passion in women. For a special after-dinner treat, try serving almond paste, also known as marzipan, in the shape of suggestive fruits.

Asparagus: Asparagus contains high amounts of vitamin E, considered one of the sex hormone stimulants, as well as potassium. Vitamin E increases blood and oxygen flow to the genitals, and potassium is important for healthy sex hormone production. The suggestive shape of asparagus can help get you in the mood, too. To achieve the optimal aphrodisiac effect, I always recommend that you include this delicious, healthy vegetable in your diet whenever you can!

Avocado: Because of its shape, the ancient Aztecs named this fruit *ahuacatl*, or testicle. Virgin Aztec girls were forbidden from going outdoors during the harvest of avocados. Avocados contain high levels of folic acid, which helps to metabolize proteins, providing the body with more energy. They also contain vitamin B₆, which increases testosterone production, as well as potassium, which helps regulate a woman's thyroid gland.

Bananas: This popular fruit contains bromelain enzyme, believed to increase libido in men. It also contains high amounts of potassium and B vitamins including riboflavin, which increases the body's overall energy levels.

Carrots: Carrots are rich in vitamin A, a nutrient needed for sex hormone production. For men, vitamin A is vital for sperm production.

Celery: Celery contains a powerful substance known as androsterone, which is an odorless aphrodisiac found in male perspiration that has been shown to be a sexual stimulator in certain women.

Chilies: Capsaicin, the spicy substance that gives chili peppers their kick, as well as curries and other spicy foods prepared with them, stimulates nerve endings to release epinephrine, a chemical that causes increased heart rate and possibly triggers the release of endorphins, natural opiates released from our bodies that cause a pleasurable feeling and natural high.

Chocolate: If you've ever wondered why you receive an ornate box chock-full of utterly decadent chocolates on Valentine's Day, your partner may know more than you think. Chocolate has been shown to contain a stimulant, phenylethylamine, which induces a sense of well-being and excitement that is conducive to lovemaking. The natural caffeine in chocolate also provides an added boost by giving you more energy.

Foods that Cause Low Libido

Diets low in fat: A certain amount of fat is needed in your diet, as fats are the building blocks for hormones.

Hydrogenated oils and fats: While good fats are essential to pleasure, these fats interfere with them and a good sex life.

Excess sugar: Sugar overload causes blood sugar fluctuations that decrease energy, overall well-being, and sexual health. It may

also compromise neurological and circulatory actions that are vital for healthy performance. These problems are often evidenced in diabetics. (See Chapter 7 on the link between diabetes and erectile dysfunction/heart disease.)

Crash diets: A sudden drop in daily calorie or nutrient intake may cause a decline in sex hormones and a lagging libido. Avoid starving your body of essential nutrients. Provide it with the foods it needs.

Eggs: Eggs have long been considered a symbol of fertility. In ancient Greece, the use of sparrow eggs as an aphrodisiac was prevalent, and the sparrow is also associated with Aphrodite. In India, the Kama Sutra lists sparrow eggs as a potency builder. In many Asian countries, fertilized eggs are thought to strengthen libido. Eggs are also a good source of cholesterol, a needed element in the production of sex hormones, including testosterone and estrogen. Recent research on eggs suggests that consuming them in moderation does not increase the risk of heart disease.

Figs: A halved fig is thought to resemble a female's vagina and is traditionally considered a sexual stimulant. Figs are very high in amino acids, which are critical to increasing libido and boosting sexual stamina. For a man to break open a fig and eat it in front of his lover was once considered a powerfully erotic act. In Italy, fresh Black Mission figs are served in a cool bowl of water and decadently eaten with the fingers to "set the mood."

Recipe for Love

Asparagus with Roasted Garlic and Pine Nut Sauce

Yield: 2 servings

1 head garlic
Salt and pepper to taste
2 tablespoons olive oil, divided
1 pound asparagus, trimmed and cleaned
3 tablespoons finely chopped pine nuts

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees F. Remove any excess layers of the papery skin around the head of the garlic and cut just enough off the top to expose the cloves. Place the head of garlic on a square of aluminum foil and season with salt and pepper. Drizzle 1 tablespoon

of the olive oil over the top and wrap the head entirely in the foil. Bake the garlic for 40 minutes, or until it is golden and soft.

Meanwhile, steam the asparagus until it is tender but not soggy, about 1–2 minutes. Arrange asparagus on a plate.

To prepare the garlic and pine nut sauce, squeeze the roasted garlic cloves into a bowl. (They are easily removed with a knife.) Using a fork, mash the garlic together with the pine nuts and remaining olive oil.

To serve, spread mixture on individual asparagus stalks.

For additional Resources, see page 173.

Garlic: The “heat” in garlic is said to stir sexual desires. Garlic has been used for many centuries to boost immune functions and cure conditions from the common cold to heart ailments. Make sure you and your partner eat it together—and in moderation, to avoid the sometimes strong aroma effused from the skin after consumption.

Mangoes, peaches, and strawberries: All of these are high in vitamin C, important for making sex hormones and chemical neurotransmitters for the brain.

Oysters: Oysters have long been considered the food of love. As legend has it, the famous lover Casanova ate dozens of oysters a day, once even seducing a vestal virgin by sliding an oyster from his lips to hers. Oysters contain high amounts of zinc, a mineral used in the production of testosterone and sperm production. They also contain dopamine, a neurotransmitter known to increase libido.

Pumpkin: Recent neurological research has shown that the aroma of pumpkin pie is a sexual stimulant, increasing penile blood flow in men by 40 percent. (Unfortunately, this same response in blood flow is *not* seen in women.) Pumpkin seeds are one of the best vegan sources of zinc, which for men is crucial for potency and in preventing prostate problems. Zinc is also a critical factor in boosting the immune system in both men and women.

So, the next time you want to get you or your partner “in the mood,” serve some of these foods to see whether they have an impact on your sexual desire. Even better, follow the recipe to the left as a prelude to a romantic evening! Or start your own list of great recipes and activities that rev you up.

It has been said many times that you are what you eat. Eating foods that support a healthy sexuality can make you feel healthier, more alive, sexier, more confident, and more beautiful. Likewise, sharing these foods with your significant other can elevate your relationship to a healthier, sexier level.

“Sex is an emotion in motion”—MAE WEST

*“I blame my mother for my poor sex life.
All she told me was ‘the man goes on top and the woman underneath.’
For three years, my husband and I slept in bunk beds.”*

—JOAN RIVERS

Aphrodisiacs in History

- Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, thought that sparrows were sacred, and therefore the ancient Greeks considered sparrows to be especially lustful. Because of this association, Europeans would eat sparrows, especially their brains, as aphrodisiacs.
- The ancient Roman physician Galen said that foods worked as aphrodisiacs if they were “windy,” meaning they produced flatulence! Galen theorized that a “wind” inflated the penis, causing an erection, so any food that made one gassy could give a man an erection.
- For centuries, drinking alcohol has been known to provoke the desire. Of course, too much of a good thing can also have the opposite effect. A bit of alcohol can help do away with inhibitions, but overindulgence can adversely affect performance. As noted in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, “It provokes the desire but it takes away the performance.”
- Even the Bible includes references to aphrodisiacs. In Genesis 30:14–16, Leah and Rachel, two of Jacob’s wives, go to the fields to collect mandrake root, believed to have aphrodisiac powers because of its somewhat humanlike shape.
- Many substances are believed to be aphrodisiacs because of the Doctrine of Similars, constructed by Paracelsus (1493–1541). He said that diseases could be cured by plants or materials that physically resembled the organ or condition being treated. That’s why many animal horns (shaped like the penis) and even bananas were thought to treat sexual disorders and increase desire.
- Ancient cave drawings have shown hunters eating the testicles of animals they killed. It’s believed that the men hoped to take on the characteristics of that animal, including its virility.

Pheromones: What Are They, and Do They Affect Libido?

Of course, foods aren't the only sexual stimulants that can create a romantic mood. My patients often ask me about the legitimacy of other aphrodisiacs, such as perfumes that contain pheromones to attract members of the opposite sex. Pheromones are airborne chemicals released into the environment by our bodies that affect the physiology and behavior of other members of our species. Recent studies have shown that human beings, like animals, produce, emit, and respond to these odorless substances.^{2,3} Pheromones have been documented to influence sexual behavior in various animals, promoting attraction between male and female moths, snakes, monkeys, hamsters, and many other species. Pheromones are detected by a sensitive organ in the nasal cavity, which in turn induces the sexual behavior.

In a study recently reported in *Nature* magazine, Martha K. McClintock and Kathleen Stern of the Department of Psychology at the University of Chicago found evidence that humans also detect and are influenced by pheromones. Through their experiments in reproductive-age women, they found strong evidence that human pheromones affect physiology.⁴ This may explain why some women who live or work together report that their menstrual cycles tend to synchronize.

A woman's physiology regarding her sexual response to a man's scent is complex. A recent study revealed that 400 women exposed to androstene—one—a pungent pheromone derivative of testosterone found in male sweat—responded negatively or favorably depending on whether they had the gene OR7D4 in their system. Women with no copies of the gene reacted to male sweat as if it were a sweet perfume! Women with one copy of the gene were neutral in their response. And women with two copies reacted in a negative way and found the smell “sickening.”

Despite the evidence that pheromones affect sexual desire, we still lack scientific proof that the use of commercial perfumes attracts the opposite sex through the use of pheromones. Of course, anything that makes you smell sexy certainly can't hurt! And if wearing a perfume makes a woman *feel* sexy, indeed she will *be* sexy.

Scent and Sexual Desire

Have you ever been cooking in the kitchen, only to have your partner come up behind you and give you a sexy pinch on the behind? Sure, you probably looked adorable as you stirred the brownie mix and licked your finger after dipping it in the batter, but it also might have something to do with the aroma of the food you were cooking!

Olfactory signals, whether naturally produced, like pheromones, or from substances in the environment, like your home cooking, can be powerful arousal stimulants. Humans can detect between 10,000 and 30,000 different odors. Women, in general, have a keener sense of smell than men. Thus, specific scents that induce an increase in sexual desire may be worth further exploration.

Recent studies conducted at the Smell and Taste Treatment Research Foundation in Chicago by Alan R. Hirsch, M.D., have shown that the smells of certain foods can be sexually arousing.⁵ Dr. Hirsch, a neurologist, psychiatrist, and the neurological director of the foundation, became interested in the connection between odors and sex when he discovered that about 18 percent of patients who lose their sense of smell, a condition known as anosmia, develop sexual dysfunction. Could this inability to detect certain smells have some direct effect on sexual response? Can the smell of certain foods induce sexual arousal specific to both men and women?

In Hirsch's study of 30 women between the ages of 18 and 40, using vaginal blood flow as the indicator for sexual arousal, he found the preferred odor for women was licorice—specifically the candy Good & Plenty—which caused an increase in vaginal blood flow of 13 percent. The combination of licorice and cucumber also created this same increase in vaginal blood flow. The combination of lavender and pumpkin pie increased vaginal blood flow by 11 percent. The women also exhibited a negative response to several odors. These included cherry, which caused an 18 percent reduction in vaginal blood flow, and charcoal barbecue smoke, which caused a 14 percent reduction. Contrary to what the commercials would have you believe, male colognes also did not cause an increase in response, but rather were shown to cause a 1 percent decrease in arousal response!

Women’s “Favorite Smells”

Dr. Hirsch and fellow researchers at the Smell and Taste Treatment Research Foundation have conducted trials to gauge women’s sexual response to certain scents. By measuring the blood flow to the vagina, various odors were tested to evaluate arousal seen in the female study patients. Interestingly, the degree of arousal seen in women in response to scents was far less dramatic than that seen in men. Furthermore, certain odors actually diminished female arousal.

Scent	% increase in vaginal bloodflow
Good & Plenty candy/cucumber combination	13%
Baby powder scent	13%
Good & Plenty candy/banana nut combination	12%
Pumpkin pie/lavender combination	11%
Baby powder/chocolate combination	4%
Certain women’s perfumes	1%
Scent:	% decrease in vaginal bloodflow
Cherries	18%
Barbecue-smoked charcoal	14%
Certain men’s colognes	1%

To spice things up, remember to keep a bowl of Good & Plenty candy next to your bedside and leave the barbecuing to your partner!

Men’s “Favorite Smells”

Dr. Hirsch also recruited 31 male participants between the ages of 18 and 64, and used 30 scents and 46 test odors to evaluate their response. The indicator used to evaluate sexual arousal in men was penile blood flow. Results

showed that the greatest measurable increase in penile blood flow (40 percent) occurred with the combination of lavender and pumpkin pie scents.

Table: Increase in Penile Blood Flow Produced by Top 10 Odors in 31 Male Volunteers

Scent	% increase in penile bloodflow
Pumpkin pie/lavender	40%
Doughnut (cinnamon)/black licorice	31.5%
Pumpkin pie/doughnut	20%
Orange	19.5%
Lavender/doughnut	18%
Black licorice/cola	13%
Black licorice	13%
Doughnut/cola	12.5%
Lily of the valley	11%
Buttered popcorn	9%

Cinnamon in combination with licorice and doughnuts rated second, with an increase in penile blood flow of 31.5 percent. Third was a combination of pumpkin pie and doughnuts, with an increase of 20 percent. The least favored odors (not shown) were cranberry and chocolate. Hirsch also found differences dependent on men's ages and characteristics. In general, older men preferred the smell of vanilla more than younger men. Men who stated that they were having the best sex lives tended to prefer a strawberry scent. Those who claimed to be having intercourse the most frequently liked lavender, Oriental spice, and cola. Interestingly, and in contrast to the women, men responded positively to every odor that was tested.

Why do men and women respond differently to various scents? There are many theories. Certain odors, foods, and scents may remind us of past experiences or events. Perhaps certain scents bring back happy memories, while others induce negative sensations, making us less receptive to sexual feelings. As we know from research conducted on male and

Tips for You and Your Partner

Experiment with scent. Find the scents that make you happy, bring back fond memories, and make you feel more amorous.

The following are some other ideas for making use of scent to spark your desire:

- Think about scents from your childhood or from places you love. Recreate them and assess their effect on you.
- Experiment with different fruit scents and tastes, such as a slice of strawberry or a piece of banana. What type of reaction does this induce from you or your partner?
- Try various essential oils, scented candles, or massage lotions in the bedroom.
- Cook with your partner. Cooking involves almost all of the senses. Think of these stimuli and how they can awaken your senses and arouse your desires: the sight of the rainbow of colors of a vegetable tray; the sensation of butter and flour in your hands when kneading a soft, pliable pastry dough; the aroma of sizzling garlic in a pan with olive oil; the taste and sensation of a piece of dark chocolate melting on your tongue. And, of course, if you murmur “sweet nothings” in your partner’s ear while you’re cooking, you’ll activate the “hearing sense,” too!

female brains, a woman’s sexual response to scent differs from a man’s. Just because a certain aroma has increased a woman’s blood flow to the vaginal area doesn’t necessarily mean she’s primed for sex. And blood flow to the genitals isn’t as predictable an indicator of sexual arousal for women as it is for men. As the studies show, women tend to respond less vigorously to fragrant stimuli as compared to men, although women are in general more *sensitive* to smell.

My older patients often ask me about nurturing their sexuality. For them, the use of scents and other aphrodisiacs are perhaps even more important than for younger men and women. As we grow older, our

Frequently Asked Question...

Is it okay to fantasize about someone else during sex to increase my sexual stimulation? Should I be concerned if I need to do this to get interested?

Sometimes, you or your partner may need to fantasize about someone else to become aroused and stimulated. More than four out of 10 Americans enjoy sexual fantasies and erotica to boost their libidos. As with most things in life, moderation is key. If you are

fantasizing about someone else every time you are with your partner in an intimate way, then there is a problem. What needs to be explored is why you aren't fantasizing about your partner. Are you still attracted to him? His body? His scent? These factors and many others will be discussed in this book. By not addressing them, you are being dishonest with yourself and your partner regarding the true state of your relationship.

sense of smell decreases. Older men tend to have more trouble detecting faint smells as compared to their female cohorts. Hirsch recommends that if you are a woman and want to induce male sexual arousal, bake something with lots of cinnamon and pumpkin spice. If you're a man and want to induce the sexual arousal of a more mature woman, throw away your cologne, light some lavender-scented candles, and buy her a box of Good & Plenty candy!

Debbie and Ron found themselves eating a bit hurriedly as they exchanged soft glances and affectionate conversation over their sumptuous oysters and warm buttered asparagus. But things heated up even more at home when Debbie lit some lavender- and pumpkin-scented candles, and brought out the strawberries and fondue pot. I'll leave you, dear reader, to imagine the rest of their evening!

Questions for Reflection

1. Does eating a certain food put you or your partner “in the mood”?
2. Can you think of creative ways to use food when you and your partner are engaged in foreplay?
3. What smells invoke a strong reaction in you, both positive and negative?
4. Do you find scented products like perfume or after-shave to be a turn-on or a turn-off? What about your partner? Do you have a “signature scent” that drives your partner crazy?
5. Have you and your partner experimented with any aphrodisiacs? How well did they work?
6. How might you use scents creatively to arouse you and your partner?