



# Sexual attraction

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**Sexual attraction** is attraction on the basis of sexual desire or the quality of arousing such interest.<sup>[1][2]</sup> **Sexual attractiveness** or **sex appeal** is an individual's ability to attract the sexual or erotic interest of another person, and is a factor in sexual selection or mate choice. The attraction can be to the physical or other qualities or traits of a person, or to such qualities in the context in which they appear. The attraction may be to a person's aesthetics or movements or to their voice or smell, besides other factors. The attraction may be enhanced by a person's adornments, clothing, perfume or style. It can also be influenced by individual genetic, psychological, or cultural factors, or to other, more amorphous qualities of the person. Sexual attraction is also a response to another person that depends on a combination of the person possessing the traits and also on the criteria of the person who is attracted.



*The Flirtation* (1904), by Eugene de Blaas

Though attempts have been made to devise objective criteria of sexual attractiveness, and measure it as one of several bodily forms of capital asset (*see erotic capital*), a person's sexual attractiveness is to a large extent a subjective measure dependent on another person's interest, perception, and sexual orientation. For example, a gay or lesbian person would typically find a person of the same sex to be more attractive than one of the other sex. A bisexual person would find either sex to be attractive. Asexuality refers to those who do not experience sexual attraction for either sex, though they may have romantic attraction (homoromantic, biromantic or heteroromantic) and/or a non-directed libido.<sup>[3]</sup> Interpersonal attraction includes factors such as physical or psychological similarity, familiarity or possessing a preponderance of common or familiar features, similarity, complementarity, reciprocal liking, and reinforcement.<sup>[4]</sup>

The ability of a person's physical and other qualities to create a sexual interest in others is the basis of their use in advertising, film, and other visual media, as well as in modeling and other occupations.

In evolutionary terms, it is thought that female humans exhibit different sexual behaviours and desires at different points in their menstrual cycle, as a means to ensure that they attract a high quality mate to copulate with during the most fertile period of the menstrual cycle. Differing hormone levels throughout the menstrual cycle affect a woman's overt behaviours, influencing the way a woman presents herself to others during different stages of her menstrual cycle, in attempt to attract high quality mates the closer the woman is to ovulation.<sup>[5]</sup>

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## Social and biological factors

Human sexuality has many aspects. In biology, sexuality describes the reproductive mechanism as well as the basic biological drive that exists in all sexually reproducing species and can encompass sexual intercourse and sexual contact in all its forms. There are also emotional and physical aspects of sexuality. These relate to the bond that exists between individuals, which may be expressed through profound feelings or emotions. Sociologically, it can cover the cultural, political, and legal aspects; philosophically, it can span the moral, ethical, theological, spiritual, and religious aspects.

Which aspects of a person's sexuality attract another is influenced by cultural factors, and has varied over time, as well as personal factors. Influencing factors may be determined more locally among sub-cultures, across sexual fields, or simply by the preferences of the individual. These preferences come about as a result of a complex variety of genetic, psychological, and cultural factors.

A person's physical appearance has a critical impact on their sexual attractiveness. This involves the impact one's appearance has on the senses, especially in the beginning of a relationship:

- Visual perception (The symmetry of the face, physical attractiveness, health and how well they act or move, for example while dancing);
- Audition (how the other's voice and movements sound);
- Olfaction (how the other smells, naturally or artificially; the wrong smell may be repellent).

As with other animals, pheromones may also have an impact, though less significantly in the case of humans. Theoretically, the "wrong" pheromone may cause someone to be disliked, even when they would otherwise appear attractive. Frequently, a pleasant-smelling perfume is used to encourage the member of the opposite sex to more deeply inhale the air surrounding its wearer, increasing the probability that the individual's pheromones will also be inhaled. The importance of pheromones in human relationships is probably limited and is widely disputed,<sup>[6]</sup> although it appears to have some scientific basis.<sup>[7]</sup>

Many people exhibit high levels of sexual fetishism, and are sexually stimulated by other stimuli not normally associated with sexual arousal. The degree to which such fetishism exists or has existed in different cultures is controversial.

Pheromones have been determined to play a role in sexual attraction between people. They influence gonadal hormone secretion, for example follicle maturation in the ovaries in females and testosterone and sperm production in males.<sup>[8]</sup>

## Sexual attraction and high anxiety

A research conducted by Donald G Dutton and Arthur P. Aron aimed to find the relation between sexual attraction and high anxiety conditions. In doing so, 85 male participants were contacted by an attractive female interviewer at either a fear-arousing suspension bridge or a normal bridge. Conclusively, it was shown that the male participants who were asked to by the female interviewer to perform Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) on the fear-arousing bridge, wrote more sexual content in the stories and attempted, with greater effort, to contact the female interviewer after the experiment than those male participants who performed the TAT on the normal bridge. Another test was done, a male participant, chosen from a group of 80, was given anticipated shocks. Along with the male was an attractive female confederate, who was also being shocked. The experiment showed that the male's sexual imagery in the TAT was much higher when self shock was anticipated and not when the female confederate shock was anticipated.<sup>[9]</sup>

## Enhancement

People consciously or subconsciously enhance their sexual attractiveness or sex appeal for a number of reasons. It may be to attract someone with whom they can form a deeper relationship, for companionship, procreation, or an intimate relationship, besides other possible purposes. It can be part of a courtship process. This can involve physical aspects or interactive processes whereby people find and attract potential partners, and maintain a relationship. These processes, which involve attracting a partner and maintaining sexual interest, can include flirting, which can be used to attract the sexual attention of another in order to encourage romance or sexual relations, and can involve body language, conversation, joking, or brief physical contact.<sup>[10]</sup>

## Sex and sexuality differences in sexual attraction

Men have been found to have a greater interest in uncommitted sex compared to women.<sup>[11]</sup> Some research shows this interest to be more sociological than biological.<sup>[12]</sup> Men have a greater interest in visual sexual stimuli than women. However,<sup>[13]</sup> additional trends have been found with a greater sensitivity to partner status in women choosing a sexual partner and men placing a greater emphasis on physical attractiveness in a potential mate, as well as a significantly greater tendency toward sexual jealousy in men and emotional jealousy in women.<sup>[14]</sup>

Bailey, Gaulin, Agyei, and Gladue (1994) analyzed whether these results would vary according to sexual orientation. In general, they found biological sex played a bigger role in the psychology of sexual attraction than orientation. However, there were some differences between homosexual and heterosexual women and men on these factors. While gay men and straight men showed similar psychological interest in casual sex on markers of sociosexuality, gay men showed a larger number of partners in behaviour expressing this interest (proposed to be due to a difference in opportunity). Self-identified lesbian women showed a significantly greater interest in visual sexual stimuli than heterosexual women and judged partner status to be less important in romantic partnerships. Heterosexual men also had a significantly greater preference for younger partners than homosexual men.<sup>[15]</sup>

## Sexual preferences and hormones

The Ovulatory Shift hypothesis refers to the idea that female humans tend to exhibit different sexual behaviours and desires at different points in their cycle, as an evolutionarily adaptive means to ensure that a high quality male is chosen to copulate with during the most fertile period of the menstrual cycle.<sup>[16]</sup> It is thought that, due to the length of time and the parental investment involved for a female to reproduce, changes in female psychology during different menstrual periods would help them make critical decisions in mating selection. For example, it has been suggested that women's sexual preferences shift towards more masculine physical characteristics during peak phases of fertility. In such, a symmetrical and masculine face outwardly indicates the reproductive value of a prospective mate.<sup>[17][18]</sup>

### *Ovulation and Female Sexual Preferences*

There is evidence that women's mate preferences differ across the ovarian cycle. A meta analysis, investigating 50 studies about whether women's mate preferences for good genes related male traits differ across the ovarian cycle found that women preferences change across their cycle, and women show the greatest preference for good genes male traits at their most fertile window.<sup>[19]</sup>

Female sexual preference for male face shapes has indeed been shown to vary with the probability of conception across the menstrual cycle. Findings showed that during a 'high conception' stage of the menstrual cycle, women were more attracted to men with less feminine/more masculine faces for short term relationships.<sup>[20]</sup> Unlike men, women's sexual arousal has been found to be generic, meaning it is non-specific to either men or women.<sup>[21]</sup> The aforementioned research suggests that there may be a possibility that female sexual arousal might become more sex-specific during the most fertile points of the menstrual cycle.

In males, a masculine face has been positively correlated with fewer respiratory diseases and as a consequence, masculine features offer a marker of health and reproductive success.<sup>[22]</sup> The preference for masculine faces is only recorded in short-term mate choices. It's therefore suggested that females are attracted to masculine faces only during ovulation as masculinity reflects a high level of fitness, used to ensure reproductive success. Whilst such preferences may be of lesser importance today, the evolutionary explanation offers reasoning as to why such effects are recorded.

As well as masculinity, females are also more sensitive to the scent of males who display high levels of developmental stability.<sup>[17]</sup> An individual's developmental stability is a measurement of fluctuating asymmetry, defined as the individual's level of deviation from perfect bilateral symmetry. In a comparison of female college students, the results indicated that those normally-cycling were more receptive to the scent of shirts worn by symmetrical men when nearing peak fertility in their ovulatory cycle. The same women reported no such preference for the scent of symmetrical men when re-tested during non-fertile stages of the menstrual cycle. Those using the contraceptive pill, and therefore not following regular cyclical patterns, also reported no such preference.<sup>[17]</sup>

As with masculine faces, the ability to determine symmetry via scent was likely designed by natural selection as a means to increase the probability of reproductive success through mating with a male offering strong genetics. This is evidenced in research focusing on traits of symmetrical males, who consistently record higher levels of IQ, coordination, social dominance, and consequently, greater reproductive fitness.<sup>[23][24]</sup> As symmetry appears to reflect an abundance of desirable traits held by the male in question, it's self-evident that such males are more desirable to females who are seeking high quality partners to mate with. In such, during ovulation, females show a strong preference for symmetrical males as they are reaching peak fertility. As it would be advantageous for asymmetrical men to release a scent similar to that produced by symmetrical males, the female signal used to detect symmetry is presumed to be an honest one (in that asymmetrical males cannot fake it).<sup>[25]</sup>

In addition to this, females have different behavioural preferences towards men at different stages in their cycles. It has been found that women have a preference towards more masculine voices during the late-follicular, fertile phase of the menstrual cycle.<sup>[26]</sup> They are particularly sensitive towards voice pitch and apparent vocal-tract length, which are both testosterone related vocal traits. This effect has found to be most significant in women who are less feminine, (those with low E3G levels), in comparison to women with higher E3G levels. It has been suggested that this difference in preference is because feminine women (those with high E3G levels), are more successful at obtaining investment, therefore, it is not necessary for these women to change their mating preferences during their cycles. Whereas more masculine women may make these changes, in order to enhance their chances of achieving investment as much as possible.

Women have been found to report greater sexual attraction to men other than their own partners when near ovulation compared with the luteal phase. Women whose partners have high developmental stability have greater attraction to men other than their partners when fertile. This can be interpreted as women possessing an adaptation to be attracted to men possessing markers of genetic fitness, therefore sexual attraction depends on the qualities of her partner.<sup>[27]</sup>

### ***Ovulation and Ornamentation***

Hormone levels throughout the menstrual cycle do not only affect a women's behaviour in terms of preferences, but also in terms of their own overt behaviours. The Ornamentation Effect is another phenomenon influenced by a female's stage in her menstrual cycle which refers to the way a women presents herself to others, in a way to attract potential sexual partners. Studies have found that the closer women were to ovulation, the more provocatively they dress, and the more attractive they are rated as.<sup>[28]</sup>

Similar to the function in animals, it is probable that the reason for this ornamentation is in order to attract potential partners, and that a women's motivations may vary across her cycle.<sup>[29]</sup> Research into this relationship has discovered that women who were to attend a discothèque and rated their clothing as 'sexy' and 'bold,' also stated that their intention for the evening was to flirt and find a partner to go home with.<sup>[30]</sup> Although direct causation cannot be stated from this, this research suggests that there is a direct link between a women's ornamentation and her motivation to attract mates.

It is also possible that women's are sensitive to the changes in their own physical attractiveness throughout their cycles, such that at their most fertile stages their levels of attractiveness are increased. Consequently, they choose to display their increased levels of attractiveness through this method of ornamentation.<sup>[31]</sup>

During periods of hormonal imbalance, women also exhibit a peak in sexual activity.<sup>[32]</sup> As these findings have been recorded for female-initiated sexual activity and not for male-initiated activity, the causation appears to be hormonal changes during the menstrual cycle.<sup>[32]</sup> In addition, studies have also found that women report themselves to be significantly more flirtatious with men, other than their partner's, during the most fertile stages of their cycle,<sup>[33]</sup> as well as a greater desire to attend parties or nightclubs where there is the potential to meet male partners.<sup>[31]</sup>

Research has also found that menstrual cycles affect sexual behaviour frequency in pre-menopausal women. For example, women who had weekly sexual intercourse with men had menstrual cycles with the average duration of 29 days, while women with less frequent sexual interactions tended to have more extreme cycle lengths.<sup>[34]</sup>

### ***Male's Responses to Ovulation***

Changes in hormones throughout a female's cycles do not only affect the way the female behaves herself, but also the way males behave towards them. Prior research has found that men are a lot more attentive and loving towards their partner's when they are in the most fertile phase of their cycles, in comparison to when they are in the luteal phases.<sup>[35]</sup> As well as becoming increasingly jealous and possessive over their partners during this stage.<sup>[33]</sup> It is highly likely that these changes in the male's behaviour is a results of the female's increased desire to seek, and flirt with other males outside of the partnership. Therefore, these behavioural adaptations have developed as a form of mate-guarding, in order to increase the males likelihood of maintaining the relationship, and therefore increasing chances of reproductive success.

## See also

- Body odor and subconscious human sexual attraction
- Erotic capital
- Erogenous zone
- Human height
- Human physical appearance
- Interpersonal attraction
- Koinophilia
- Mating system
- Physical attractiveness
- Sexual arousal
- Sexual dimorphism
- Sexual field
- Sex in advertising
- Sexual selection
- Sex symbol

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- On peculiarities of Russian sex appeal, see Draitser, Emil (1999). *Making war, not love: Gender and sexuality in Russian humor*. New York: St. Martin's Press. pp. 13–32. ISBN 0-312-22129-0.

## External links

- Sexual Attraction Among Humans (<http://serendip.brynmawr.edu/biology/b103/f02/web1/dfernandez.html>)
- FaceResearch (<http://www.faceresearch.org/>) – Scientific research and online studies on the role of faces in sexual attraction
- Reunions Set Off Sex Urges ([http://flatrock.org.nz/topics/relationships/reunions\\_set\\_off\\_sex\\_urgues.htm](http://flatrock.org.nz/topics/relationships/reunions_set_off_sex_urgues.htm)), Article on sexual attraction among birth relatives sparked by reunion.
- [www.lookism.info](http://www.lookism.info) (<http://www.lookism.info/>) deconstruction of attraction and beauty standards

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