

Sexual health for postmenopausal women improved by hypnotic relaxation therapy, study shows

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Hypnotic relaxation therapy improves sexual health in postmenopausal women who have moderate to severe hot flashes, according to Baylor University researchers who presented their findings at the American Psychological Association's recent annual meeting.

The study, which examined sexual comfort, [sexual satisfaction](#) and [sexual pleasure](#), is a first step toward a safe and effective alternative toward [hormone replacement therapy](#), which carries associated risks of cancer and heart disease, said Gary Elkins, Ph.D., director of Baylor's Mind-Body Medicine Research Laboratory and a professor of psychology and neuroscience in Baylor's College of Arts & Sciences.

The conclusion was based on a study funded by the National Institutes of Health. For the study, 187 women were randomly assigned to receive either five weekly sessions of hypnotic relaxation therapy or supportive counseling, said lead researcher Aimee Johnson, a doctoral student in psychology and neuroscience at Baylor University.

Led by researchers at Baylor's Mind-Body Medicine Research Laboratory, study sessions were conducted by master's-level therapists trained in clinical hypnosis. Participants in the hypnotic relaxation therapy group received a hypnotic induction followed by suggestions for relaxation, coolness and mental imagery. Participants who received sessions of supportive counseling discussed their symptoms with a

trained therapist but did not receive any hypnosis.

Women completed questionnaires at the beginning of the study, at the end of treatment and at a 12-week follow-up. They also were asked to complete a self-report questionnaire assessing the extent to which [hot flashes](#) interfered with sexual intimacy. The decrease in estrogen that accompanies menopause is associated with hot flashes, night sweats, weight gain and vaginal dryness, discomfort or pain.

"The most common complaints are being too tired, anxiety, depression, hot flashes and the fear of close contact," Elkins said. Because warmth that comes from closeness can trigger a hot flash, some women grow to fear intimacy, he said.

At treatment's end, women who had received hypnotic [relaxation therapy](#) reported significantly higher sexual satisfaction and pleasure, as well as less discomfort. This improvement also was seen at the 12-week follow-up assessment.

"Women's [sexual health](#) improved, whether because of sleeping better, less stress or fewer hot flashes, or perhaps other unknown mechanisms," Elkins said.

Researchers noted that postmenopausal sexual health can be affected by factors other than hot flashes, among them fatigue, self-esteem, a partner's health, relationship quality and a lack of interest by either or both partners.

For many women—among them those who have had breast cancer—hormone replacement therapy is not an option for menopause-related symptoms. Estrogen, for example, has been associated with more rapid growth of breast cancer.

Previous research by Elkins has shown that clinical hypnosis can effectively reduce hot flashes and associated symptoms among [postmenopausal women](#), including a lessening of anxiety and depression.

Provided by Baylor University

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