



We need to talk about... vaginismus

SEXUAL HEALTH

Vaginismus can interfere with a woman's sex life, ability to undergo a smear test or even use tampons, yet research in this field is decades old. We talk to psychology researcher **Maria McEvoy** who has embarked on an exciting new project

WHILE vaginismus has been estimated to be the second most prevalent female sexual difficulty presenting at clinics in Northern Ireland, there are no recent statistics for the Republic of Ireland. In fact, the most current research was carried out here over 30 years ago, at which point it was estimated that vaginismus affected five in every 1,000 marriages. According to psychology researcher Maria McEvoy, a research project she is heading in Dublin City University (DCU) will be the first known study in Ireland to try to capture the experience of couples who are dealing with vaginismus, as well as their experiences of seeking help in modern day Ireland. The aim of the project is to gain a better understanding of vaginismus.

WHAT IS VAGINISMUS? Vaginismus occurs when the pelvic floor muscle group involuntarily tightens, making vaginal penetration painful and/or impossible. According to the HSE, this can disrupt or stop a couple's sex life, prevent them from starting a family and also make gynaecological and pelvic examinations difficult or impossible. "While most medical definitions concentrate on the physical spasming of the vaginal muscles when intercourse is attempted, this tends to exclude other factors at play," explains McEvoy. "Whereas the physical definition sees

vaginismus as a sexual dysfunction, in psychological terms, it can be recast as a functional spasm that is protecting the woman from anticipated harm. "The perception of harm can stem from actual experiences of attempted painful intercourse or from the anticipation that a sexual encounter will be painful. "This anticipation can come from the messages about sex that the woman has received growing up. For example, sex can be represented as 'dirty' and something that 'nice girls don't do'. "A 1994 UK study by Elaine Ward and Jane Ogden found that women with vaginismus were more likely to use negative adjectives, such as 'dangerous, painful, frightening, undignified, disgusting, animal-like' to describe sex. "The factors that contribute to vaginismus can be thought of as a spectrum from physical to psychological, relational and cultural, and a different blend of factors will contribute in a unique way to each couple experiencing it. The inability to have a sexual relationship has a profound impact on how the woman feels about herself, on her partner and on their relationship." **WHY DOES VAGINISMUS OCCUR?** Decades ago, Irish studies in psychosexual clinics in Dublin by Jim Barnes (1986) and Karl O'Sullivan (1979) identified vaginismus as a 'psychosexual experience' rather than a psychosexual dysfunction. "One of the key contributing factors in Ireland at that time was deemed to be the

Catholic ultra-conservative orthodox religious messages about sex and sexuality that linked sexual behaviours with guilt and frequently led to sexual difficulties," explains McEvoy. "Ireland was identified as being unique in Europe in terms of its staunch opposition to divorce and contraception. "However, rates of vaginismus have also been identified in countries with predominantly Orthodox Christian, Jewish and Islamic faiths. It is not the specifics of the religious messages that appear to make a difference; rather it is how strictly these rules are enforced. "Ireland nevertheless was seen as unique in terms of its conservative attitude towards sexual matters and the reluctance of the Irish people to discuss anything to do with sex. "Barnes' 1986 study of vaginismus in Ireland described how mothers socialised their female children from birth, encouraging a sense of self in these girls that prioritised the importance of responding to the demands of others. This, Barnes claimed, included a passive sexuality, and sex was portrayed as unimportant or dirty. This socialisation or conditioning by mothers was found to be subtle and well-intentioned but manipulative insofar as it reinforced a high level of control over daughters. "Fathers were often identified as peripheral figures in the family, while O'Sullivan's research in the Seventies portrayed fathers as violent, frightening figures in households where alcohol abuse was a feature. Consequently, the girls sought out men who were gentle and would not



Psychology researcher Maria McEvoy

force them into sexual intimacy. Thus, relationships could last a significant amount of time in the absence of sexual intercourse and even in the absence of communication about the difficulty." **MODERN DAY MYSTERY?** In modern day Ireland, little is known about the factors that contribute to vaginismus in couple relationships, according to McEvoy. However, preliminary findings by the DCU study suggest that some of the factors identified 30 years ago continue to be important today. "Interviews with professionals who work with women with vaginismus suggest that conservative religious messages still feature in the developmental histories of women seeking help," says the psychology researcher. "Sex is either not talked about or frightening messages are conveyed that appear to be designed to control the sexuality of daughters emphasising that girls should stay away from boys, that girls' reputations can be damaged and lives ruined by pregnancy. In particular, it is suggested that these messages may have been transmitted from mother to daughter.

In psychological terms, vaginismus can be recast as a functional spasm that is protecting the woman from anticipated harm

DO YOU WANT TO HELP CHANGE THINGS?



THE current DCU study, which is being carried out in conjunction with Dr Rosaleen McElvaney and Dr Rita Glover, is seeking to start a conversation about vaginismus in Ireland. Maria McEvoy is currently looking to interview couples who have experienced vaginismus. The study has been approved by the DCU Ethics Committee and all information will be held in the strictest confidence and all identifying information will be completely removed.

Contact Maria McEvoy at:

www.vaginismusresearchireland.com
email: maria.mcevoy26@mail.dcu.ie
or telephone: 087 401 9690

"The silence surrounding sexual matters may pervade the household and beyond, so that the women are unable to speak to sisters or best friends about sexual concerns. "This difficulty may have been compounded by the lack of sex education in Irish schools until recent years beyond what might have been covered in biology class, neglecting any education on the emotional or relationship aspects of sex. "It is suggested that an Irish culture of silence has surrounded the discussion of sexual matters that may have left those with sexual difficulties feeling ashamed and isolated."

NUTRITION CORNER

MY DAY ON A PLATE — DJ Dandelion —



The DJ and lover of vintage style tells nutritional therapist **Rosanna Davison** the truth about what she eats in an average week

WHERE DO YOU SHOP?

The Hopsack Health Food Store in Rathmines, Aldi, SuperValu, Tesco and Dunnes Stores

DESCRIBE YOUR TYPICAL BREAKFAST?

A cup of Jasmine green tea, Aldi's Really Nutty muesli (wholegrain/no added sugar) with milk or natural bio yoghurt to which I add two tablespoons of organic golden linseed, chia seeds, blueberries and lecithin.



... TYPICAL LUNCH?

When I'm at home it's usually an omelette with mushrooms, beans, vegetarian Quorn sausages, a side salad and two slices of bread with two cups of green or black tea. When I'm working, the lunch routine goes out the window.



... TYPICAL DINNER?

Mainly organic wholegrain spelt pasta with Quorn pieces, peppers, mushrooms, courgettes, spinach, balsamic dressing and feta. Or baked salmon with steamed potatoes, kale and carrots.

... TYPICAL DAILY SNACKS?

A couple of organic dates or savoury corn cakes with hummus or maybe a salad sandwich with green tea.

IS THERE ANYTHING YOU WON'T EAT?

Meat or anything with coconut.

WHAT WOULD YOU COOK TO IMPRESS SOMEONE?

I wouldn't. I ain't that kind of girl.

GUILTY FOOD PLEASURE?

A large packet of Keogh's Sweet Chilli and Irish Red Pepper crisps with a bottle of Chilean Malbec.



ULTIMATE COMFORT FOOD CURE?

Mashed potatoes with butter, steamed kale, carrots and vegetarian meatballs in an onion gravy

TAKEAWAY ORDER?

Vegetable curry with jasmine rice.

HAVE YOU TRIED ANY DIET FADS RECENTLY?

No, but I have cut out all of my favourite indulgences from my regular diet for the past two months, including red wine, dark chocolate, crisps, coffee and cakes.

Dandelion's shopping list

- Wholegrain spelt pasta
- Quinoa • Couscous
- Soba noodles • Porridge
- Muesli • Sweet potatoes • White potatoes • Kale
- Carrots • Celery • Courgettes
- Peppers • Scallions
- Mushrooms • Spinach
- Rocket • Onions • Beetroot
- Oranges • Blueberries
- Tomatoes • Dates
- Falafels • Frozen chips
- Quorn products
- Vegetarian burgers
- Salmon or mackerel
- Feta Cheese • Butter
- Natural bio-yoghurt
- Milk • Olive oil
- Tomato and herb pasta sauce
- Herbal tea • Marmite
- Breads • Free-range eggs
- Nuts • Beans • Hummus
- Bottled Water

WHAT WOULD YOUR LAST SUPPER BE?

I'd fly to Gopal's of Soho in London and order everything from their vegetarian selection, with lots of wine.

Rosanna's Verdict

It's brilliant to see that Dandelion buys a variety of colourful fruit and vegetables in her weekly shop, as it's recommended that we eat a rainbow of different colours each day. Adding green veggies, such as spinach, kale and broccoli, help to support iron intake and cruciferous veggies contain important sulphur-based compounds to support detoxification organs like the liver.

Berries, including blueberries, strawberries, blackberries and raspberries, are a good idea to eat as regularly as possible. They're not only rich in the vitamin C that's essential for building the collagen needed for healthy skin. They're also a low-sugar fruit that's seriously rich in the antioxidants to help to fight signs of premature ageing. Antioxidants are crucial for neutralising the free radicals that are linked to this cellular damage. Blueberries, raspberries and strawberries rank as some of the highest of any food on the ORAC Scale, which measures the antioxidant capacity of a variety of spices and foods.

The primary vitamin antioxidants are vitamin E, beta-carotene and vitamin C. As the body cannot make these, it's important that they're regularly supplied in the diet. Generally, the most colourful plant foods have the highest content of complex antioxidants and each type operates in different tissues of the body. Citrus fruit is particularly beneficial at this time of year too, when common colds and flus are more widespread, as they're a rich source of vitamin C. But strawberries, kiwis, bell peppers and leafy greens are also useful sources of the immune-supporting nutrient.

Dandelion buys some nutritious sources of complete protein in her shop, including hummus, quinoa, nuts, eggs and beans, as well as nourishing complex carbohydrates like sweet potato, oats and wholegrain spelt pasta. Carbs are an essential part of a balanced diet, and choosing brown or wholemeal versions helps to improve their benefits. They're less processed, contain higher levels of certain vitamins, and their fibre helps to both support normal digestive health, maintain more stable blood sugar levels and keep you feeling full for longer.

Dandelion's regular shop also features fatty fish including salmon and mackerel, known for its rich content of essential omega-3 fats. These are important for cell membrane integri-

ty, as well as for maintaining smooth, supple skin and healthy hair.

For breakfast, Dandelion goes for nutty muesli with natural yoghurt, seeds and blueberries. A nutritious and filling breakfast, adding Greek yoghurt can be an excellent option as it tends to be higher in protein and lower in sugar than many other yoghurt varieties — especially if you opt for a brand free from added refined sugar. Adding mixed seeds is a super idea to avail of their essential fats, fibre, protein and minerals, and the berries really boost the antioxidant content of this breakfast.

A simple muesli is a good addition to breakfast for the complex carbs and energy-boosting properties of oats, but it's a good idea to avoid versions with added sugar, and look out for a really natural brand.

When she has the chance, Dandelion's lunch features an omelette with beans and mushrooms, veggie sausages and bread, with a side salad and tea. This makes a well-balanced meal to support

'Adding mixed seeds is a super idea to avail of their essential fats, fibre, protein and minerals'

energy levels for the afternoon, with plenty of dietary fibre, complete protein and raw leafy greens. For dinner, she has wholegrain pasta with protein and veg, or salmon and greens. Again, she's aware of choosing the foods she enjoys most to create a healthy, balanced meal with the three important macronutrients. Dandelion's snacks are similarly healthy choices, such as dates, corn cakes and hummus or a salad sandwich. Dandelion's diet is well-balanced and nutritious, with minimal refined sugar and plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables. Well done.

DJ Dandelion Sargeant will be spinning classic Eighties and Nineties tunes at Strictly Handbag in the Sugar Club on Saturday, September 22. The event is in honour of the club's founder Martin Thomas who passed away earlier this year. A percentage of the proceeds will go to Jigsaw in support of youth mental health. See www.strictlyhandbag.com

