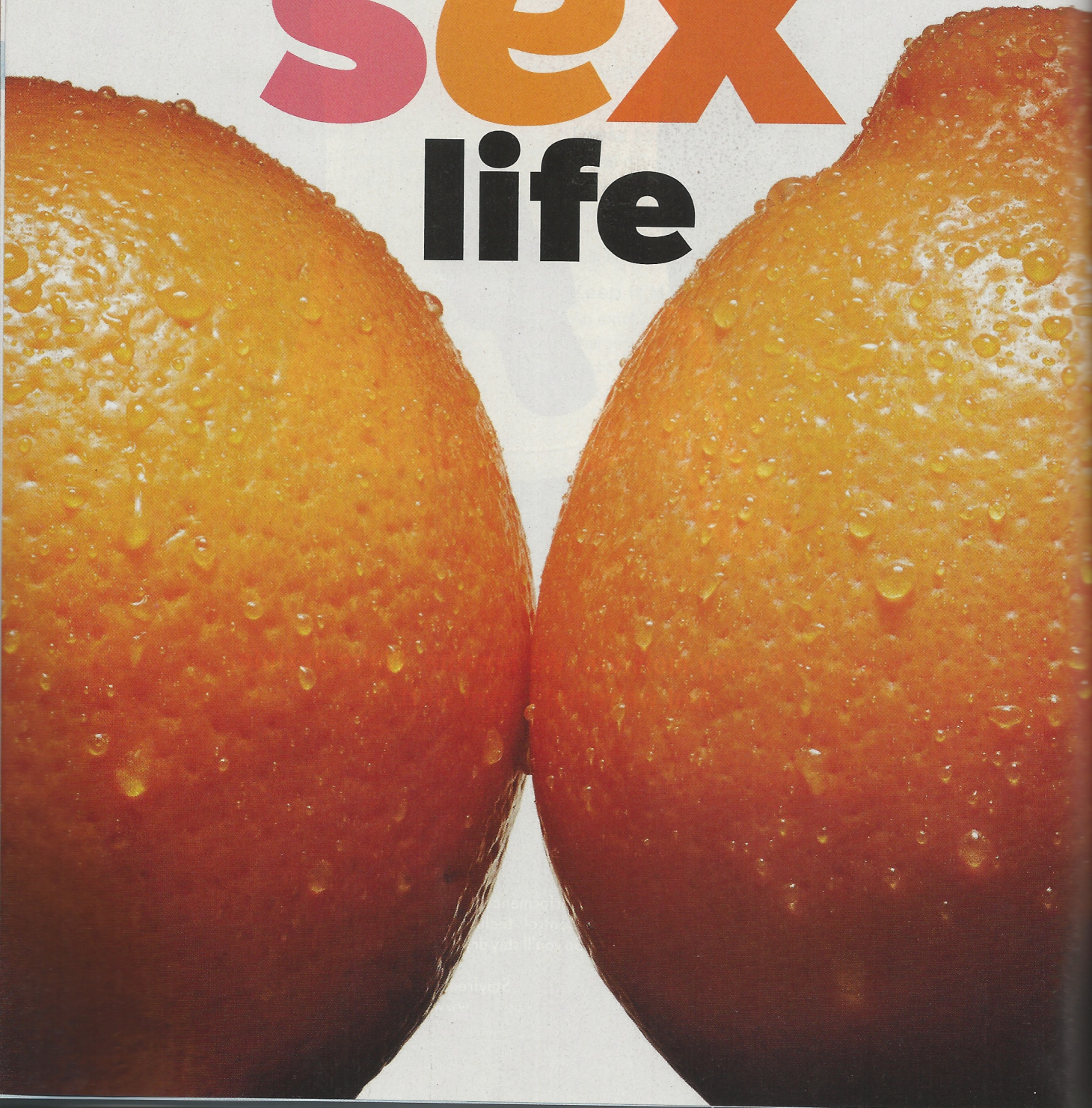


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Remember sex?  
That **really fun thing** you used  
to do whenever you  
wanted (and—oh!—how you  
used to want it!) before  
kids came along? Well, here's  
how to start getting  
more of the good stuff again.

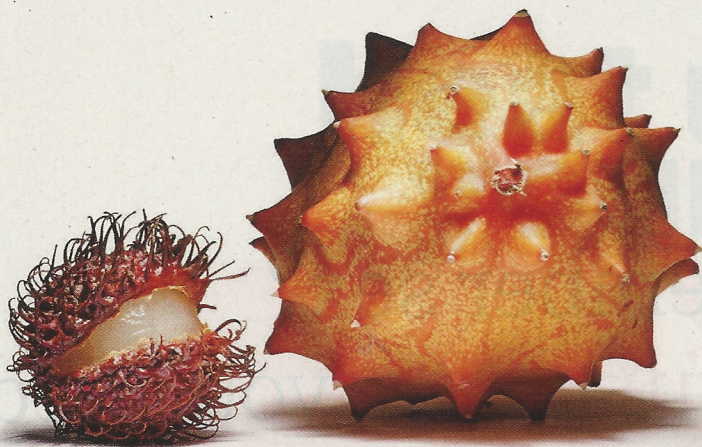
by JESSICA PRESS photographs by LEVI BROWN

**D**o the days of sex on the couch—during the afternoon, in the middle of an endless *Lost* marathon—seem like another lifetime? Or how about those, ahem, high-volume sessions, after which you and your partner would joke that your neighbor surely must've heard you? Maybe there were pre-work shower romps or post-work very happy hours that are now but a distant memory. Because ever since kids came into the picture, those spontaneous, uninterrupted, uninhibited rendezvous have invariably had to end faster than you can say, “Did I lie on a Lego again?” Right?

Well, you're not alone: *Parents* and Quester, a research company in Des Moines, recently surveyed more than 200 moms and found that while 91 percent of them were

satisfied or very satisfied with their sex life pre-parenthood, only 60 percent are since kids have come along. While 44 percent of moms report having sex at least two or three times per week, 25 percent get busy once a week and another quarter have sex once or a “few times” per month. A mere 6 percent have sex once every few months or less.

The good news? Moms aren't content to sit back and let that decline continue. Sixty-one percent of them want more sex and better sex. “I would love to get back some of the spontaneity,” says a 26-year-old Virginia mom. “I miss the mornings of ending up naked on the kitchen counter!” Find out what else moms revealed—and what the nation's foremost sex therapists, researchers, and doctors recommend for heating things up again. Neighbors, consider yourselves warned.



"Something tells me you're not in the mood."

## Desire? Are you out there?

Whether you work outside the home or in it, after a long day of tending to everyone else it's no wonder that all you really may want to do when the kids go to bed is sleep. More than half of moms in our survey—58 percent—say their sex drive decreased after having kids. Moms report feeling "touched out" after devoting so much time to holding, rocking, or nursing a baby or snuggling a toddler. As one 41-year-old mom in Massachusetts puts it: "At the end of the day I'm exhausted and mentally drained. The last thing I want is anyone talking to me, let alone touching me!" It's hard to feel desire when you're understandably wiped out. "I have woken up my sleeping baby to avoid having sex with my husband because I was too tired," admits a 38-year-old Florida mom. But research shows that if you're not in the mood for some rumpy-pumpy, having sex with your partner—even if it doesn't feel hot at first—will wind up feeling good and ultimately improve your relationship. "For years, people assumed that the sexual response cycle went from desire

to arousal to orgasm to resolution," says marriage and family therapist Michele Weiner-Davis, author of *The Sex-Starved Marriage: Boosting Your Marriage Libido: A Couple's Guide*. "But for millions of women, stages one and two are actually reversed: You have to be physically aroused before your brain registers desire."

The bottom line: Even sex that feels, well, obligatory at first, will get better and kick off a cycle that benefits everyone: You'll have fun; your body will release oxytocin, "the bonding hormone," which will make you feel more connected to your partner; and your partner will feel more loving and invested and helpful. "When there is a dry spell, the best thing we've done is to just do it anyway.

We rarely regret it afterward," says a 31-year-old Kansas mom. "One or both of us may be tired or not in the mood, but once things are rolling, we are both generally happy that we took the initiative."

That sentiment dovetails with research on the effects of sex on our brain, says Ian Kerner, Ph.D., a sex counselor and author of *She Comes First: The Thinking Man's Guide to*

### Who initiates sex?

14%  
"Me"

45%  
"My partner"

41%  
"Both of us"

**61% of moms say they'd like to have sex more often.**

*Pleasuring a Woman:* "One of the nice things about sex is that it releases a neurochemical cocktail that really lowers inhibitions. So it's worth being open to a little sexual willingness—say, 'Let me just fool around a little bit—maybe it will lead to sex, maybe it won't, maybe my clothes will stay on, maybe they won't.' But it's to your benefit to at least give things a chance."

Of course, if you're giving it the ol' college try and still are not able to get into the mood or enjoy sex, it could help to reach out to your gynecologist to explore the possibility that something hormonal is amiss. (See "Sexual Healing," on page 118.) Given how many changes your hormones undergo with pregnancy, childbirth, delivery, breastfeeding, and beyond, it's possible that you have low progesterone or testosterone, two hormones that, when diminished, could explain low libido (as well as depression, anxiety, insomnia, and more), according to Jennifer Landa, M.D., creator of the Rewire Your Desire program to help women rejuvenate their sex lives and coauthor of *The Sex Drive Solution for Women*. Hormone levels are easy to check, and there are a range of treatments to help you—from lifestyle changes to hormone supplements to therapy.

## Do not disturb!

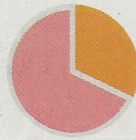
Remember the days of personal space? That probably went out the window once your firstborn was done with a crib. In fact, 65 percent of moms revealed that, more than any other challenge, their biggest obstacle to having sex is a lack of privacy. "We're scared a child will walk in or wake up!" says one 30-year-old Pennsylvania mom. Another North Carolina mom, 41, summed up that seemingly universal feeling that Mom's bedroom is an

extension of the playroom: "If our door is shut, it seems to be an open invitation to have the kids knocking."

To counter that, there are three tools every mom needs in her sex arsenal: a good lock on her door, the occasional kid-free night with her partner, and scheduled trysts. First, the lock. Sure, you want to be able to tend to your child in case of an emergency. But as sex therapist Laurie J. Watson, author of *Wanting Sex Again*, is quick to point out, the differential between the time it takes to open a locked door and an unlocked one is so minor—while the peace of mind that comes with knowing you'll have privacy is huge.

Still, Watson says a lock isn't enough: Every mother needs to get out of the house altogether. "A mom's home space is often her work space—it's where she's doing the bulk of child care: nursing, feeding, cleanup, you name it. She needs a separation, and

**65% of moms say their biggest obstacle to sex is a lack of privacy.**



**36% of moms say sex lasts between 10 and 20 minutes from foreplay to finish.**

going away, even to a nearby hotel for one night, is one way to physically provide that separation—to get her into a zone where she can once again be a sexual person instead of "Mommy." Watson's suggestion: Rent a hotel room for an evening; get there well ahead of your partner; take a nap and a long bath, then meet him downstairs at the bar for drinks and appetizers. After, you can head back to the room together for some interruption-free sex. A night away will invigorate your relationship—and so will the sheer act of planning it and having it as something to look forward to. If a getaway just isn't possible, consider an at-home sexcation—family or friends to watch the kids for a night while you get to enjoy your house without any parenting demands.

Finally, Laurie B. Mintz, Ph.D., professor of psychology at the University of Florida and author of *A Tired Woman's Guide to Passionate*

*Sex*, adds, there's a real benefit to scheduling trysts with your partner as if they were exotic affairs. Be committed about putting them in your calendar and sticking to them. "It's helpful to have a night out, just the two of us," says a 33-year-old mom in Utah. "When we schedule time just to be together, our sex life is better."

**You sexy thing (yes, you!)**

Every mom has been there: standing in front of the mirror after a shower, noticing a new stretch mark or tush dimple that seemed to magically sprout as soon as you popped out a kid. (In fact, 20 percent of moms in our survey said self-consciousness about their body negatively affects their sex life.) For some moms, it's an annoyance—but for many, it's a major setback. "The effects that childbirth had on my body have made me very self-conscious and hindered my sex drive," says one 22-year-old Tennessee mom. But instead of longing for the body you had before childbirth, or going to bed in what one 39-year-old Pennsylvania mom said her husband refers to as her "Little League coach" look, Weiner-Davis says it's important to step back and accept that our body will only continue to evolve over time. "We need to change what we can and accept what we can't," she says, adding that if you're uncomfortable with your body, become committed to doing a healthy, practical amount of exercise and eating a more balanced diet. But more than that, Weiner-Davis says it's imperative to recognize that sometimes when we get hung up on the body changes, what we're avoiding is the change our identity is going through—and accepting the role of mother takes time. So be patient with yourself. And trust that your partner is very unlikely to be noticing the alleged



"I thought you locked the door."

"You still find me sexy, don't you?"



**58% of moms say their sex drive has decreased since having kids.**

flaws you're seeing—and more likely to find you totally appealing.

Of course, many men don't realize that women often aren't mentally in the same place they are. "A woman can feel pooped on, puked on, and there she is putting bottles in the dishwasher when her partner starts rubbing up behind her. All she's thinking is, 'I don't feel sexy at all!'" Dr. Kerner acknowledges. "But from a guy's perspective, we're seeing the body that turned us on in the first place!" Still, Dr. Kerner says women can help their partner help them feel hotter again: "A guy can't do everything to make a woman feel sexy, but certainly a woman can clue him in to how she feels and let him know what she needs to start to feel sexier again, whether it's new postbaby clothes or lingerie, or time to have her nails done or get a haircut." Plus, Dr. Kerner says,

it's totally fair to tell your man what you need to feel comfortable in bed, whether it's dimming the lights or even keeping a T-shirt on. Dr. Kerner says: "Honestly, once a man starts fooling around, he's more consumed by the experience of sex than any nitpicky details you may be worrying about."

## Spicing it up

For a lot of moms, sex has become routine, another item on their to-do list. "Before kids, I enjoyed being intimate with my husband," says a 30-year-old mom in Pennsylvania. "Now, it feels like more of a chore, something else that someone is demanding of me." And many moms reveal that when they do have sex, it's hardly earthshaking—and often unsatisfyingly quick: More than a third of women say sex lasts less than 20 minutes, and research shows that it takes most women about 20 minutes of foreplay to get aroused. "I want to be taken by surprise instead of my husband rolling over after I've had a horrible day and asking, 'Do you wanna?'" says a 27-year-old Texas mom. "Many women say they have a low libido—but what that often means is really 'I'm too sexy for my marriage,'" says Watson. "That is, women often

### Good vibrations

**If you don't have one already, consider buying a vibrator. Sex therapist Laurie J. Watson recommends the AcuVibe (from \$50 on Amazon), because it has a longer frequency that reaches the deeper nerve endings on the pelvis. Says Watson: "It's especially great for a tired mom who wants a quickie and doesn't even have those 20 minutes to get aroused."**

### hot or meh?

Is your marriage still smoking? Take our quiz at [parents.com/hot](http://parents.com/hot).

have higher eroticism than their partner does—but feel ashamed of that or believe the man has to initiate the creative ideas. But most men are not threatened by introducing sex toys or role play. They're excited by it!"

Dr. Mintz agrees. "It's really good to experiment and to push your boundaries a little," she notes. She says a blindfold, in particular, can help with distraction during sex: If you can't help but think about your to-do lists and everything but sex, a blindfold can shift your focus to the physical sensations you're experiencing. "Then again, you never want to do anything you find aversive," says Dr. Mintz. "And that requires communication."

It can be difficult to place the same emphasis on your sex life as you do on your children, but modeling a loving, satisfied relationship is one of the most beneficial things you can do for kids. Sometimes what's best for your sex life is simply knowing that you're not at all alone: Experts agree that every marriage struggles with sex at some point and that the early parenting years are notorious for being sexually challenged. Just realizing that sex issues are ubiquitous, and getting your partner to understand that too (show him this article!), should shift your expectations, take pressure off both of you, and be the first step to a more satisfying sex life than ever.

**43% of moms think other couples are having more sex than they are.**

**CALL THE EXPERTS** Feel like your love life is in need of repair beyond the advice here? Reach out to a sex therapist, who can work with you individually or with you and your partner. Check out [aasect.org](http://aasect.org) for a list of certified ones in your area.