

BABY, LIGHT

Men have Viagra, but there's no such help for women when it comes to romance boosters. No fewer than 43 per cent of the fairer sex, aged 18 to 59, seem to have problems with libido. Yet, there is hope. Martina Anzinger delves into the secret world of aphrodisiacs for women

We've heard Shirley Bassey sing "Diamonds are all I need to please me. They can stimulate and tease me". Just as eternal as a girl's best friend is the quest for objects that inspire love, lust or passion – so-called aphrodisiacs. But, thank God, not all remedies for infertility, inability to have orgasms or simple disinterest in love and sex are as costly as that sparkler round your little finger.

Aphrodisiac recipes have been cooked up for males and females alike throughout the world for millennia. In ancient Greece sparrows were eaten since the tiny birds were considered lustful and held sacred by Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love from whose name "aphrodisiac" is derived. But there have also less gruesome things on the menu for love-filled nights.

Europeans have long been indulging in foods which are warm, moist and windy, or resemble male or female sexual organs – like carrots, oysters, mandrake root, sweet peas, mustard or pepper. As the Roman physician Galen said, "wind" makes things erect. And, meanwhile, we all know about the importance and pleasure of being "juicy", being supplied with squishy and tasty lavender, ginkgo, ginseng or aloe lubricants for clitoral, perineal or vulval stimulation not just by doctors, but also by local shops and companies on the Internet.

Yet, there is a difference between sexual desire and function. Lubricant enables penetration, but is no substitute for genuine female arousal. Also, some love aids may owe their reputation more to their smell and looks or to superstition than any sexual magic experienced by those who eat them. Evidence is sparse – as scientists and pharmaceutical firms are only just discovering – of aphrodisiacs supposed to help woman get the hots.

"Most research now recognises four main types of female sexual dysfunction (FSD): disorders of desire, disorders of arousal, inability to achieve orgasm and painful intercourse," says Dr Mitra Boolell, a senior director of clinical sciences at Pfizer, the company that has given men Viagra. Pfizer and another company, Vivus from California, have been working on a similar love drug for women for some time now, but research in this field is still at a very early stage.

Anyway, the urge to take drugs to lighten your inner fire is great among women – which can have effects more fiery than desired in the case of anabolic steroids, a runner in today's fitness studios. "My clitoris had enlarged. Sex feels very different and far better," says Catherine, a 25-year-old American living in London. "And don't look a year over 18." But, as she adds: "I became

very edgy, at work and irritable at home. My boyfriend and I were rowing all the time".

So, better no drugs! The fact is anyway that, with the exception of ginseng, alcohol and marijuana, modern medical science recognises the efficacy of very few so-called aphrodisiacs. These are principally cantharides and yohimbine, which stimulate sexual arousal by irritating the urinary tract when excreted. Cantharides consist of dried remains of the blister beetle. Yohimbine is a crystalline alkaloid substance derived from the bark of the yohime tree found in central Africa, where it has been used for centuries. Yet, caution is necessary with regard to those love aids as stimulatory effects are elicited only with toxic doses.

So what can we do in order to experience love and lust and not kill ourselves at the same time? Well, it helps to understand the chemical processes behind our sexual urges. Of course, it all has to do with our hormones. While estrogen is responsible for the development and function of female sexual organs, it is testosterone that powers the sex drive in both men and women.

Given the right balance, sexual stimuli passes to the "pleasure centre" of our brains, which sends signals via the nerves to the pelvic region. Blood vessels in the genitals are prompted to dilate, admitting a rush of blood that inflates both male and female erectile tissues. Then, the vessels close off – and our boat is definitely not sinking. We have all the signs of sexual excitement. Norepinephrine and dopamine, two chemicals, are released from the brain, making us feel, oh so marvellous.

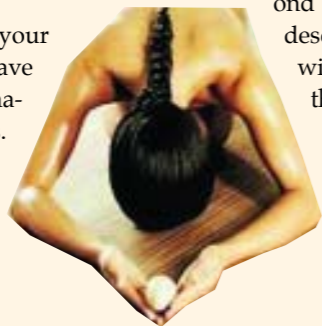
Age, illness, stress or under-nourishment can all affect our body's ability to produce its own aphrodisiacs. When hormone levels drop, libido can lag and sexual dysfunction may develop. Luckily, there are certain foods, scents, movements and even sounds that can save our love life.

Oysters, for example. This favourite among erotic foods was widely documented as an aphrodisiac by the Romans in the second century AD as mentioned in a satire by Juvenal. He described the wanton ways of women after ingesting wine and eating "giant oysters". No wonder, since they are high in protein and zinc, a mineral required for producing testosterone.

Cupid's arrows may also flow if vanilla is in the air – or in your food. The delicious spice and fragrance is obtained from the minute seeds contained in the pulpy pods of the showy, intricately-



Vanilla increases the flow to parts other aphrodisiacs cannot reach



my FIRE

shaped vanilla orchid, which grows in tropical America, Madagascar, Java or Tahiti.

According to the Australian Orchid Society, old Totonac lore has it that Xanat, the young daughter of the Mexican fertility goddess, loved a Totonac youth. Unable to marry him due to her divine nature, she transformed herself into a plant that would provide pleasure and happiness. The Aztecs originally used vanilla as a flavouring for chocolate. Today, it is part of various dishes as well as an ingredient of creams, perfumes, and candles. Its precise physical effect is that its aroma increases the vaginal and penile blood flow.

Another well-known aphrodisiac has South American roots – chocolate. The Aztecs named it the "nourishment of the Gods", and their emperor, Montezuma drank 50 golden goblets a day to enhance his sexual prowess. That legend made its way to Europe – Casanova is said to have consumed it – but for women that lore needs some vitally important correction. Recent research suggest that the fair sex are more susceptible to its effects than men. Letting the velvety sweet melt in your mouth gives you a feeling of a natural high because it contains phenylethylamine, called the "love chemical" by some researchers, and also serotonin.

A woman's sweet tooth and her sex life are apparently most closely linked. Chewing on bits of licorice root – available also as candy or even jewellery – is said to enhance love and lust more than anything, as studies of the Smell and Taste Foundation in Chicago show. Licorice contains glycyrrhizin, which is 50 times sweeter than sugar. So, remember this next time you give your "honey" or "sweetie" a birthday or Valentine's present!

Time to leave the realm of food and turn to drink. It will come as no surprise that alcohol can greatly enhance a romantic interlude – but especially wine. Its colour is a feast for our eyes, feeling its drops on our lips is like being caressed with fingertips, not forgetting the stimulating effect on our palate. But consume with moderation! No less an authority than Shakespeare gave this

advice, writing in Macbeth: "It [wine] increases the desire but it takes away the performance."

The same applies to coffee. The smooth black liquid containing caffeine tickles our central nervous system rather than having any specific effect on desire – but it does keep you going. However, beware – it's better to fight that love killer stress, rather than tank up Starbucks on a date. In matters of love and lust, the watchwords are good health and emotional balance. For this, we may turn to aerobics or jogging. Physical exertion, in fact, causes the release of endorphins in the brain, which in turn make your hormones flow. Research has shown that women exercising regularly tend to have more active sex lives, are more easily aroused, and reach orgasm more quickly.

But for the lazy or not-so-fit, there are less vigorous forms of exercise, like yoga or tantra. They provide postures designed to help resolve specific sexual problems. Some are said to work by stimulating blood flow to the genital area while others are directed to maximising performance and satisfaction.

If that kind of exercise has no appeal either, then twirling around on the dance floor can get the juices flowing just as well. Facing the music and dancing can really get you started, no matter if the band is playing Strauss, Gershwin or Cohen.

But nothing is better than touching, as research from Tennessee State University proves. Remember the last time your loved one ran his fingers through your hair and left your conscience bare. This is not witchcraft. Nerve endings in the skin send "oh, that's great" messages to your brain, which then goes on holiday, temporarily stopping to produce the stress hormone cortisol. This creates a surge in serotonin and dopamine, two chemicals that we know so well, remember?

So, show a little tenderness and don't forget to exercise your lips the next time you see your partner. A kiss is not just a kiss – it will give you the hots when all other aphrodisiacs fail. ■