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Examining Unmet Needs in Women's Health

July 2020

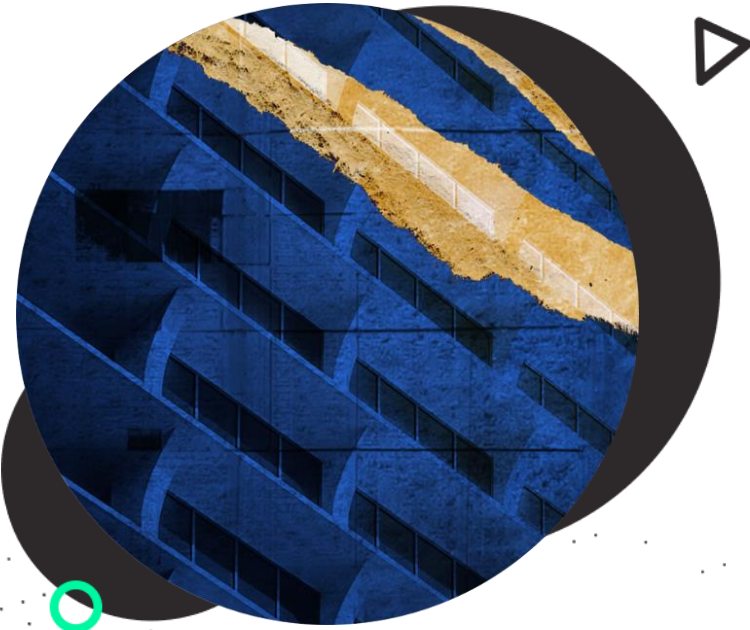


Women's health



- When we set out to explore the *data gap in women's health needs* as a pro-bono project for a health tech hive group, we weren't ready for the *enormity* of the canyon between need and provision
- An 'endless eyeroll' of tangled issues emerged
 - *how hard it is to find beautiful, perceptive images online of older women*
 - *how PPE doesn't fit women on the front line of the COVID battle*
 - *the institutionalisation of sport in education doesn't necessarily benefit women's bodies*
 - *women are not simply 'small men' whose health needs can be treated thus*
- For those of us at Discover.ai brainstorming, reading, analysing, it became clear there were several macro themes that intersect to show *just how ignored and marginalised* some of the issues that define women's lives (menopause, endometriosis, fertility) are
- We drew evidence from a number of spaces – brands, organisations and experts, to highlight the existence of this chasm in women's health – and why it is *so important* to tackle it

Unmet Needs in Women's Health



Our question

What can we learn from online conversations around women's health, wellness and lives in order to identify key unmet needs for women in the health space, to serve as scoping and inspiration for new strategies and research?

Our sourcing areas

We brought together rich & inspiring language from 251 sources across 19 sourcing areas and covering the following languages / markets: UK, US + some global mix

1. Reviews of books speaking about data gaps/women's health
2. Influencers and key figures speaking about women's health conditions
3. Key brands targeting women's health
4. Teen health and relationship advice sites and forums
5. Magazines, forums, influencers bloggers focusing on WOC (particularly health)
6. Consumer forums for women to discuss health issues concerns
7. Sex and wellness educators and influencers
8. LGBTQ inclusive magazines and discussions with a health slant
9. Feminist activist spaces and voices
10. Women's sport forums, discussions and magazines
11. Scientific journals, articles and abstracts focusing on key conditions/women's health
12. Ayurvedic/Natural Remedies
13. Women's mental health, mental load, imposter syndrome discussions
14. Long term/chronic condition advice (e.g. cardiovascular disease, cancer, HIV, respiratory, diabetes)
15. Consumer forums on particular health conditions (heart, lung, asthma, osteoporosis, endometriosis, PCOS)
16. Culture, Lifestyle and arts journalism (incl women's health)
17. Women's Health and Wellbeing bloggers and influencers/online magazines
18. Hormone therapy/solutions - discussions, forums, advice
19. Natal, post-natal and infertility advice, discussions, forums, activists

The 8 Macro-Causes of the Women's Health Data Gap

Being Disbelieved



A side effect of the lack of data on women's conditions, partnered with an ability by official institutions to devalue the self-knowledge of women and their own bodies, means that many women find themselves being disbelieved when they come to present their health conditions to medical professionals

The Wrong Metrics



It has always been difficult to communicate the pain you feel to someone else, to put something so felt and personal into words. But there is a sense that women's pain is not only minimised, but that the mode and scales of measuring it are the wrong ones. With women putting up with vast amounts of pain that should be signals that something is wrong, both women themselves and the institutional tools should be finding different ways to value pain.

Ignored & Forgotten



The data gap which comes from 'invisibility' – where it is assumed that women are just 'small men' and any data already held is good enough. Yet this can be taken further, crossing with the data of different ethnic, socio-economic and gender-fluid groups – who may well have their own unique matrix of cultural causes

Working for Winners



A sense of shame and taboo around so much of women's health and health conditions, prioritising the needs of those who are 'disgusted' by women's health over the people actually living with these conditions – and therefore also making it seem as if any women with those conditions are abnormal/exceptions in the public eye

Human Giver Syndrome



The sense that women should happily give all of themselves in service of another – whether partners, children or friends – leading to a devaluing of the self, which manifests in a minimising of needs which link directly to women's pleasure, or other priorities, and contributes to conditions such as burnout and stress

Ignoring Emotions



To every health condition there is the physical impact and the emotional impact. This could be the normal but difficult emotions that come with transitioning through life-stages, or it could be more serious mental health implications; both are undervalued and ignored

The Burden of Beauty



The way in which the pressures of the beauty industry and the standards it imposes contribute to the creation of mental and physical conditions. But conversely, the way in which unhealthy bodies create physical effects which are also considered 'not beautiful' – leading to more complex feedback loops

Access to Information



A sense that even for the conditions which have some data and research underlying them, the access to healthcare and knowledge for women is distributed incredibly inconsistently – as well as creating more data, it has to be considered how it can be fairly disseminated



Women's Bodies



WOMEN'S BODIES

Conditions which specifically affect people with women's bodies

Unmet Needs in Women's Health could be about hormonal lifestages...



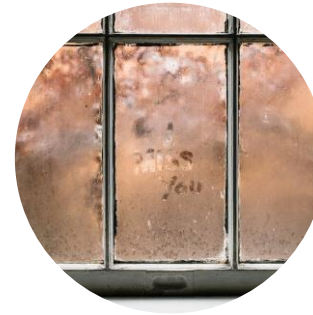
Fertility laid bare

Many women would be better prepared for disappointment by removing the 'magic' of conception and understanding the statistics/risks of e.g. miscarriage and the reducing the mental and emotional fallout of complex fertility issues



The Emotional Waiting Room (or peri menopause)

You will.. have flagging energy, plummeting sex drive, burn up with heat, feel anxious/flat/low, lose your memory along with your patience.. feel awful & not know why. Don't worry, it's completely normal, it's just the arrival of the menopause.



Menopausal Realities: Life-Changing Yet Taboo

Changes of so much importance and with so much impact practically physically and emotionally that get such little coverage or care ..

WOMEN'S BODIES

Conditions which specifically affect people with women's bodies

Unmet Needs in Women's Health could be women's realities...



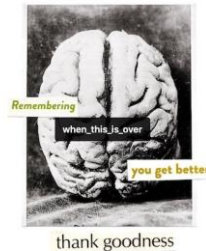
The Anatomy of Incontinence

The commonality of incontinence in woman is a subject often not talked about due to shame and stigma – despite being related to both stress and post-pregnancy



Supporting Healthy Weight Gain

The difficulty of negotiating healthy relationships with weight amongst societal pressures for women to be thin, and incomplete data around healthy weights, BMI and obesity



Untangling Mental Health

Mental health in women is a complex and urgent area – worsened by other health conditions, factors that affect women such as abuse or violence, and manifesting differently between genders



Reprioritising Pleasure

Acknowledging that sexual pleasure for women should be a health priority, not a source of shame or indulgence. Linking this to common health issues and concerns such as vaginal dryness



Hormonal Lifestages





Unmet Needs in Women's Health could be...

Fertility laid bare

Many women would be better prepared for disappointment by removing the 'magic' of conception and understanding the statistics/risks of e.g. miscarriage and the reducing the mental and emotional fallout of complex fertility issues

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FERTILITY CAN BE COMPROMISED BY SHIFT WORK AND HEAVY LIFTING

Shift work and heavy lifting may reduce women's fertility, study finds

Source
UK

THE POWERFUL EFFECT OF STRESS ON FERTILITY

Stress can have a powerful effect on our hormonal health and fertility

Source
USA

STRUGGLES WITH FERTILITY INDUCE STRESS, ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

Given the physical, personal, partner, and social stress associated with infertility, it is not surprising that many women will experience anxiety and depression during this time

Source
USA

LOSS OF PREGNANCY CAN HAVE LONG TERM MENTAL HEALTH IMPACT

Dr Farren's study clearly shows that a miscarriage or ectopic pregnancy can have profound and long-lasting impacts on women's mental health and we look forward to seeing how this important research can be translated into better care for patients and their families in the future.

Source
UK

THE INTENSE EMOTIONS OF INFERTILITY TAKE A TOLL ON ONE'S SENSE OF SELF

Weathering these intense emotions and the psychological roller coaster of dealing with infertility can take a toll on women's emotional and physical health, one's sense of self and relationship with a significant other and at times friends and family

Source
USA

CANCER PATIENTS CAN USE OVARIAN CRYOPRESERVATION TO SAFEGUARD FERTILITY

While ovarian cryopreservation isn't new – a version of the procedure has been used since the early 2000s by cancer patients seeking to safeguard their future fertility – the notion that it can now be deployed by healthy women who simply want to postpone the inevitable is a decidedly 2019 turn of events

Source
USA

Key Takeaways

- Fertility and the mental and physical impact of trying to conceive unsuccessfully has an enormous impact on the lives of women (and their significant others)
- The data gap is in empathetically educating women about
 - Pre-conception watchouts (i.e. how to prepare the body and mind, how to regulate harmful emotions or work scenarios)
 - The possible avenues that infertility can go down (temporary, secondary etc.) and where and how to approach seeking medical and emotional support for this
- The emphasis for this is data delivered not in a detached, medicalised way, but in a way that makes women feel that their experiences are shared and understood, not isolating and taboo



Unmet Needs in Women's Health could be...

The Emotional Waiting Room (or peri menopause)

You will.. have flagging energy, plummeting sex drive, burn up with heat, feel anxious/flat/low, lose your memory along with your patience.. feel awful & not know why. Don't worry, it's completely normal, it's just the early arrival of the menopause.

DESPITE THE 13 MILLION WOMEN IN THE UK EXPERIENCING PERIMENOPAUSE, WE'RE STILL NOT TALKING ABOUT IT ..

But despite the 13 million women in the UK experiencing perimenopause, we're still not talking about it says Brigid Moss

Source
UK

MY SKIN HAS CHANGED SO MUCH WHILE I'VE BEEN GOING THROUGH THE PERI MENOPAUSE

Moisturiser « on: April 09, 2020, 08:40:39 AM » My skin has changed so much while I've been going through the peri menopause, I seem to have aged so much in the last year

Source
UK

PERIMENOPAUSE – A PHASE THAT CAN LAST UP TO 10 YEARS AND CAUSE HOT FLUSHES, NIGHT SWEATS AND MOOD SWINGS

Together, they identified that her symptoms seemed to run in conjunction with her menstrual cycle and at 42, she was finally diagnosed with perimenopause – a phase that can last up to 10 years and cause hot flushes, night sweats and mood swings, similar to the menopause

Source
UK

'WHAT'S GOING ON?' A CONSTANT QUESTION AS PERIODS BECOME FRUSTRATINGLY UNPREDICTABLE, BRINGING NEW MEANING TO *FOMO*

During perimenopause, 'What's going on?', is a constant question as periods become frustratingly unpredictable or unusually heavy, bringing another meaning to text talk slang FOMO – 'fear of menstrual overflow' rather than missing out

Source
UK

A WAVE OF DIGITAL SOLUTIONS NOW POPPING UP DESIGNED TO HELP WOMEN UNDERSTAND AND MANAGE MENOPAUSE SYMPTOMS

While most technology products for women's health have focused on fertility, a wave of digital solutions are now popping up designed to help women understand and manage menopause symptoms And the sector looks set to grow Axa introduced a perimenopausal challenge in its 2018

Source
USA

AS WOMEN UNCONSCIOUSLY ENTER PERIMENOPAUSE FIRST SIGNS MAY BE RELATED TO THEIR EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL WELLBEING

As women unconsciously enter perimenopause the first signs may be related to their emotional and mental wellbeing, rather than physical symptoms A 2015 Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists' survey found that a whopping 45 per cent of 'older women' – their words, not ours – were concerned about depression

Source
UK

Key Takeaways

- Looking at the Peri-menopause as its own area, distinct from the menopause
- Very important transitional time with both physical and emotional implications, neither of which are being talked about or researched
- Thinking about individual symptoms vs the scale – every woman goes through this stage, but experiences vary
- The effect of shock that comes from lack of education, can make the experience much worse for people – lack of certainty about what a hot flush actually is and feels like etc
- Difficulty of reaching a life-stage at which society considers women 'obsolete' both in terms of child-rearing and attractiveness – overcoming these negative assumptions
- There are healthy behaviours which could have a massive impact on women's old age if they were considered earlier



Unmet Needs in Women's Health could be...

The Menopausal Realities: Life-Changing Yet Taboo

Changes of so much gravity and with so much weight – practically, physically and emotionally and that yet get such little meaningful coverage or genuine care ..

MENOPAUSE CONTINUES TO BE SOMETHING BETTER LEFT OFF THE LIST OF DINNER TABLE TOPICS

From what I can see, there are more organisations in the UK geared to women's health and menopause than there are in the US, where menopause continues to be something better left off the list of dinner table topics

Source

UK

SINCE A LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCE OF MENOPAUSE HAS RE- INVENTED HERSELF AS A WOMEN'S HEALTH AMBASSADOR

We also have Kathryn Colas joining us, who had a life-changing experience of menopause and has since re-invented herself as a women's health ambassador focusing on raising awareness of menopause and how women can get through it

Source

UK

3 DECADES AFTER GOLDEN GIRLS, IN AN ERA OF 3RD- WAVE FEMINISM, IT'S STILL A TABOO

Three decades after the Golden Girls, in the era of third-wave feminism and #metoo, menopause is still a taboo subject whispered in powder rooms Nobody in the marketplace knows how to talk about it and nobody wants to think about it simply because and I must be blunt here nobody thinks there's anything in it for them

Source

USA

MENOPAUSAL SYMPTOMS AND VAGINAL ATROPHY AREN'T LIFE-THREATENING CONDITIONS LIKE CANCER .. BUT THE PAIN THAT THESE WOMEN SUFFER IS SERIOUS

Although menopausal symptoms and vaginal atrophy aren't life-threatening conditions like cancer, the pain that these women suffer is serious, and can have all kinds of lasting impacts

Source

USA

WHAT NO ONE TELLS YOU ABOUT MENOPAUSE ..

What No One Tells You About Menopause Healthy Women

Source

USA

I'M 51 AND HAVE GONE FROM BEING A CONFIDENT, SELF ASSURED WOMAN TO NOT WANTING TO LEAVE THE HOUSE

I'm 51 and have gone from being a confident, self assured woman to not wanting to leave the house, awkward and suffering feelings of worthlessness

Source

UK

Key Takeaways

- Menopause is a time of change for women both physically but also emotionally and sometimes practically – relationships change and transition
- A real sense of taboo and lack of discussion around the menopause – and also an inability to discuss how uncomfortable it is
- Not on the agenda socially, can't discuss or connect to other people going through it – the amount of people going through this life stage is not representative of the cover it gets
- Importance of considering health at this time – multiple conditions throughout this deck are caused by or part of the menopause (e.g. osteoporosis, vaginal dryness) and need better consideration and targeting



Women's Realities



Unmet Needs in Women's Health could be...

The Anatomy of Incontinence

The commonality of incontinence in woman is a subject often not talked about due to shame and stigma – despite being related to both stress and post-pregnancy

100,000 BRITISH WOMEN OVER 20YRS WITH ORGAN PROLAPSE OR INCONTINENCE AFTER CHILDBIRTH

Over 20 years, more than 100,000 women across the UK have had transvaginal mesh implants to treat organ prolapse and incontinence – often after childbirth

Source
UK

INCONTINENCE ANXIETY IMPACTS ON SOCIAL, SEXUAL AND WORK LIFE

The anxiety caused by incontinence can have severe effects on a woman's social and sexual life and keeps some women away from work

Source
UK

INCONTINENCE DURING SEX FOR A QUARTER OF WOMEN SUFFERERS

It can mean worrying about leaks when you cough, sneeze, laugh, exercise, or – for a quarter of women with incontinence even when you have sex

Source
UK

BLADDER LEAKAGE IS STILL SEEN AS A TABOO

"Despite this high prevalence, bladder leakage is still seen as something of a taboo for women to discuss – they may find it hard to talk with their friends, family or even their partner, which is a perception we'd like to see change."

Source
UK

INCONTINENCE PRODUCTS HIDDEN IN STORE DUE TO EMBARRASSMENT OF PURCHASERS

One of the reasons adult incontinence products are so hard to find in the store is because they make the people who need them feel embarrassed and old

Source
USA

STRESS INCONTINENCE LEAKING URINE WHEN YOU LAUGH, COUGH OR SNEEZE – IS MORE COMMON IN PERIMENOPAUSE

Caused by weak pelvic floor muscles, stress incontinence leaking urine when you laugh, cough or sneeze – is more common in perimenopause

Source
UK

Key Takeaways

- Incontinence is always portrayed in a very abstract way by the media and this helps to drive the taboo associations for sufferers. Proactive measures will grow from honest/direct representation
- The data gap exists in 2 areas: preventative measures for females approaching pregnancy and active management/treatment for those in an immediate post-partum program and in later age. Both of these would trump passive acceptance of the issue



Unmet Needs in Women's Health could be...

Supporting Healthy Weight Gain

The difficulty of negotiating healthy relationships with weight amongst societal pressures for women to be thin, and incomplete data around healthy weights, BMI, and obesity

SHAME THAT GOES WITH BEING FAT AND SEXUALITY

Sometimes we shame ourselves, and other times people try to force a narrative where fat women have no sexuality or are promiscuous fat sluts who don't care who they bang

[Source](#)

USA

OBESITY IS A WOMEN'S HEALTH ISSUE

Obesity is a women's health issue; the prevalence of obesity is higher in women than men and excess abnormal body fat drives risk for more than 200 diseases, some specific to women.

[Source](#)

UK

THE LINK BETWEEN STRESS AND WEIGHT GAIN STRONGER FOR WOMEN

The link between stress and weight gain is stronger for women than for men

[Source](#)

USA

MANY MEDICINES WOMEN TAKE EVERY DAY AFFECT WEIGHT GAIN

Many of the medicines that women take every day, including medicines for mental health conditions, sleep, and high blood pressure, can cause weight gain or make it difficult to lose weight

[Source](#)

USA

ESTROGEN DOMINANCE FEEDS VICIOUS CYCLE OF WEIGHT GAIN

Estrogen dominance feeds a vicious cycle of weight gain for women

[Source](#)

USA

STUDY SUGGESTING CULTURAL BARRIERS TO WORKING OUT

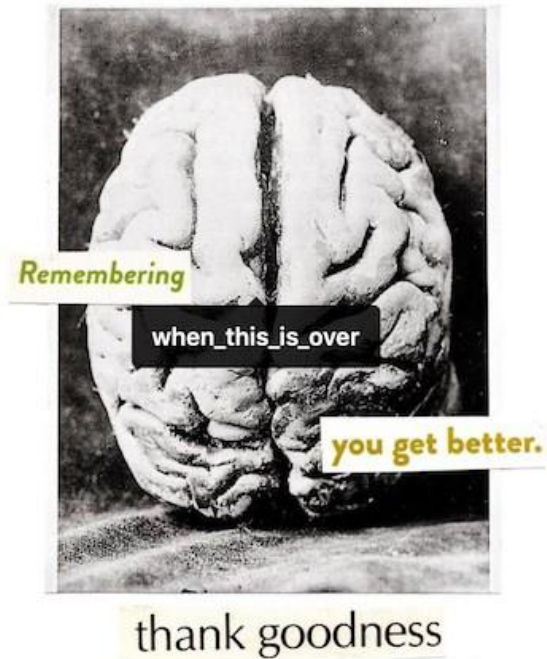
A Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center study from last fall that proclaimed yet again that black women don't work out for fear of messing up our hair, and how this is the reason we have such high rates of overweight and obesity, had me in quite a state

[Source](#)

USA

Key Takeways

- This area is about the difficulty to work out what exactly constitutes a 'healthy weight' for women – particularly considering the negative cultural associations around weight gain
- It's important to include this area amongst the current 'health and wellness' kick which has legitimised diet culture in the name of health
- Thinking about conditions such as obesity which are more prevalent in African American communities
- But also encompassing the fact that many medicines which women take, including birth control, often come alongside weight gain, which is then a tricky emotional payoff for many women
- Also BMI as an unfair and unreasonable indicator of health
- Potential to be less believed about other conditions if considered 'over-weight'



Unmet Needs in Women's Health could be...

Untangling Mental Health

- Mental health in women is a complex and urgent area – worsened by other health conditions, factors that affect women such as abuse or violence, and manifesting differently between genders

EMOTIONAL DISTRESS CAN MANIFEST IN THE BODY

Research on the mind-body connection tells us that emotional distress can and often does manifest throughout women's bodies, and that chronic pain and other physical distress can affect our mental health

Source

USA

MANY WOMEN ARE OVERFLOWING WITH STRESS

If there was an imaginary cup that would dictate how much stress women can handle, many of them are definitely letting their cups overflow, taking in more than they can handle

Source

USA

LESBIAN, BISEXUAL AND QUEER WOMEN EXPERIENCE HIGH RATES OF MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

A world leading study shows that lesbian, bisexual and queer women experience a range of poor health outcomes including high rates of mental health issues, and rates of smoking and risky alcohol use much higher than those of women in general population

Source

UK

WOMEN MAY FEEL THE SYMPTOMS OF STRESS MORE THAN MEN

Research suggests that women may feel the symptoms of stress more or get more of the symptoms of stress than men

Source

USA

IMPACT OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT ON MENTAL HEALTH NOT FACTORED INTO DATA

It's undeniable that sexual harassment can affect mental health, and while the researchers involved with the study at University of Montreal didn't factor this problem into their data, it could certainly contribute to the higher rates of burnout among women

Source

USA

GENDER BASED VIOLENCE PUTS WOMEN AT GREATER RISK OF MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

Australian researchers found that gender-based violence puts women at a much greater risk of mental health problems. Hopefully the new guidelines around healthcare for women will help with that

Source

USA

Key Takeways

- Women's mental health is a complex health space, because so many of the conditions discussed in this document either have a bearing on mental health (e.g. endometriosis), or can be physical manifestations of/worsened by stress (e.g. heart disease)
- This is an area which needs serious untangling, and has many problems with regards to women not being believed – such as people who suffer with depression but are undiagnosed until something else like post-natal-depression brings it to light
- Whilst there are stigmas and concerns around mental health which affect all genders – and indeed, this space is important intersectionally for both race and LGBTQIA+ – the concerns and pressures which affect women and link to their health cannot be ignored



Unmet Needs in Women's Health could be...

Reprioritising Pleasure

- Acknowledging that sexual pleasure for women should be a health priority, not a source of shame or indulgence. Linking this to common health issues and concerns such as vaginal dryness

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UNCOMFORTABLE DAILY DRYNESS FOR MANY WOMEN

Because estrogen levels fluctuate during this time, it is common for a woman's vaginal tissue to become thinner – causing what many women report as an uncomfortable daily dryness

Source

USA

THE FIRST EVER REPRESENTATIVE STUDY ON WOMEN'S PLEASURE

How we did the research We've conducted in-depth interviews with over 3,000 women, surveyed over 15,000 and conducted the first-ever nationally representative studies about the specifics of women's pleasure and touch with over 4,000 more women, ages 18-95 – in partnership with researchers at Indiana University School of Medicine, Indiana University's School of Public Health and The Kinsey Institute

Source

USA

ENDOMETRIOSIS AFFECTS SEX DRIVE AND PLEASURE

Lack of libido or sex drive can be due to many factors but in women with endometriosis it can relate to pain during intercourse or an induced menopause causing lack of the male hormone testosterone which plays an important role in the sex drive

Source

UK

AN EMBARRASSING SILENT PROBLEM

Despite the high number of women experiencing problems related to vaginal dryness it is still a silent problem that many people feel embarrassed to talk to their partners, friends and even doctors about

Source

UK

VAGINAL DRYNESS IS COMMON AND TABOO

Vaginal dryness can be considered a taboo subject to discuss, despite it being a very common experience, particularly for women going through the menopause

Source

UK

THE FEELING THAT YOUR DELICATE BITS ARE LINED WITH SANDPAPER PROBABLY PUTS A TIN HAT ON YOUR LIBIDO

Vaginal dryness is one of the first indicators of perimenopause and added to psychological symptoms such as anxiety and depression, the feeling that your delicate bits are lined with sandpaper probably puts a tin hat on your libido

Source

UK

Key Takeaways

- Women's health often doesn't encompass a discussion of a right to not just good health but also actual pleasure – good sex should be considered a right and a necessity for those that want it
- Linking specifically to issues such as vaginal dryness (which can be caused my menopause but is also common across the board)
- Sites like OMGYes beginning to put actual research into this area

Get in touch to find out more



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