

WAR

**THIS ARTICLE
DOES**

NOT

CONTAIN

NUTS

WAKING UP!



WHAT IT DOES IS CONTAIN INFORMATION ABOUT YOUR WIFE / GIRLFRIEND / DON'T-GO-THERE THAT YOU MAY FIND SURPRISING. COULD BE MILDLY SURPRISING (YOU'RE A MAN OF THE WORLD), COULD BE FALL-OFF-YOUR-BEANBAG SURPRISING (YOU'RE 11 YEARS OLD), COULD BE MORTIFYINGLY SURPRISING (YOU'RE AN EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN), COULD BE MORE-THAN-WELCOME SURPRISING (YOU'VE GOT A HEADACHE AND JUST WANT TO GET SOME SLEEP). EITHER WAY, **CHRISTA D'SOUZA** HAS SOMETHING URGENT TO TELL YOU

PHOTOGRAPH BY Miles Aldridge

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ick a house, any house, of a weeknight around, say, 12.30am. Assuming it is inhabited by a long-term, reasonably happy, reasonably well-adjusted couple, what — if you were to pan and zoom in, Google Maps style — might be happening? This is after a mutual hard day's work, a nice supper, a bottle of wine, perhaps a couple of episodes of *The Killing*. What is the bet she is upstairs either tweeting or asleep? And he is downstairs in front of a flickering screen with his flies undone?

Oh, come now! We're not dim. Don't you think by this point we know what you mean when you say you're just going to, er, "sync your emails" before coming to bed?

"Syncing emails", "doing an Ocado shop", "tidying one's desk". Every couple has their own little code for it. But there is really no need. We women get that there is a certain pressure that needs to be released when you're not having sex with us all of the time. We get that it's a bodily function, rather like sneezing, or eating or weeing. We appreciate that you take care of it like that, as opposed to worrying us every time you feel like you need to offload, like a dog worries a sheep.

Except, here's the thing. Do you really think that whenever you are doing what you are doing, we are upstairs sleeping or reading a book? Have you ever entertained the thought that we might prefer to do it that way too, as opposed to going through the whole rigmarole of bonking? Have you considered that YOU — not just us — might need to tread quite heavily and maybe knock on the door before coming up to bed? *Wanking interruptus*. Is there anything worse?

It's not just you men, then. Us women, we masturbate too. There. I've said it.

True, from an evolutionary point of view we don't need to orgasm to procreate the way you do, and true, it's not the absolutely first

thing we necessarily think of upon entering a hotel room on a business trip (the goodies atop the mini-bar or the shower shelf tend to attract our attention first). True also that we don't need to do it all the time, every single day, sometimes twice, three times a day, to keep us from internally combusting; it doesn't provide a "remedial service", as one man I buttonholed for this article puts it, like "boxing clubs for wayward kids on the streets".

But yes, we all do it. Of course we all do it. Up and down the country, all across the world. That nice lady next door who just hit 50 and always signs for your parcels? Her cute live-in nanny? Her student daughter? All of them, I promise you. While you are, er, syncing your emails, chances are they will be too, though perhaps not quite as speedily (it takes on average two minutes for a man to climax on his own, women seven) and not necessarily to YouPorn, either. Take it from me: watching a woman on all fours with a dildo up her back bottom and a willy up her front one doesn't do it for us quite the way it does for you. (Well, it doesn't for me, though as a random poll of female Oxford grads I conducted for this story revealed, the massage/gangbang/Manuel Ferrara sections on Pornhub manage to do it for some. But we'll come back to this.)

Having a "freelancer's lie-down", "waxing the canoe", "sending muffin morse code", call it what you will just as long as you never ever call it self-pleasuring (which smacks of female ejaculation workshops). Biologically, we are no less hard-wired to do it than you. That's why Labrador bitches are just as fanatical

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THAT MANKY ELECTRIC TOOTHBRUSH IN THE PREDOMINANTLY FEMALE HOUSEHOLD YOU ONCE SPIED? DON'T ASSUME IT WAS JUST FOR BRUSHING TEETH

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cushion-humpers and bottom-yachters as Labrador dogs; why female grey langur apes bring themselves to the point of epileptic climaxes several times a day; why little girls, let's face it, can be just as sexually precocious as little boys, if not more so. Remember poor little Sally Draper on *Mad Men*, getting caught playing with herself on the divan and being carted off by a horrified Betty to the psychiatrists? (Remember Betty, for that matter, sitting on the washing machine?) Remember me, actually, in a traffic jam in my mum's car on the way back from primary school, hand as always down my knickers, and then jumping in horror, boater all skew-whiff, one plait going one way, the other going the other, as a lorry driver leered through his window and loudly hooted his horn.

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Which is a long way of saying we start young. Younger than you, probably. The way a lot of us discovered it, me included, is by dreaming about the sensation and then attempt to recreate it in real life, around the age, according to the responses I managed to winkle out from my little poll, of 11. But it varies. One friend says she wasn't able to come until someone gave her a vibrator for her 21st birthday. A female author told me that she thinks she probably first had an orgasm around the age of four. It was very specific and involved placing herself front downwards on the living room carpet and "caterpillaring" across the floor. "Batty-wagging" they called it in her family until it reached a point where her mother gently took her to one side and told her it might be better to do it in her bedroom behind a closed door.

In other words, boys are very much NOT the only furtive wankers who have to remember that at some point over the course of the weekend they've got to make an appearance outside their bedroom, if only to eat. And that manky electric toothbrush in the predominantly female household you once spied? Don't assume it was just for brushing teeth. Normal, normal, normal, in other words. Nothing weird or *Wetlands* about it at all.

So, why then, when I email a girlfriend for some inspiration, a girlfriend with whom I discuss STUFF all the time — length, size, proficiency, smell, you name it, we'll dissect it — do I get a curt, "Can't help you there, hon"? Or when I email an equally candid, chatty girlfriend: "I once knew someone who could only do it with the back of a hairbrush but can't think of anything else..."

%
OF **MEN** DO IT
DAILY

22

NOW MUST GO AND WASH MY HANDS!"

It seems disloyal to the sisterhood to say this in print, but sisters doing it to themselves is still very much a societal taboo; "Take Back the Wank" is not yet a movement with much traction. You men talking about giving it a polish before a date or after coming home from work or maybe even between getting up and having a shave, fine, it's part of the vernacular, you've been legitimately willy-pulling ever since you learnt to pee. "Stop playing with it so much, else you'll break it!" Is that not a mother's fond clarion call to all little boys? Us girls, frankly, not so much.

Whether this is a throwback to Victorian times when the practice was so linked with madness and hysteria, whether it is because our bits aren't external, easily reachable appendages like yours or that babies aren't made that way, who knows. Whatever the case, nice girls, at bottom, don't do it. It's why in *Gavin & Stacey*, Gavin and Smithy so flinched when Stacey gaily told them she'd already given herself three while "watching *Cash in the Attic*". It's why that *Sex and the City* episode way back in 1998, the one where they have to perform a Rabbit "intervention" on Charlotte to get her out of her bedroom (yes, I know you didn't see it), never really took hold. Thank God, in other words, there are women out there like Chelsea Handler and Caitlin Moran to talk in detail about it, so we don't have to. Then again, even Moran bottled having to read that chapter in her autobiography aloud for the audiobook version of her hit book, *How to be a Woman*.

Oh dear. As I write this, a not-so invisible line feels like it has suddenly been crossed. Bosoms. Bottoms. Nude sunbathing. Vaginal

% OF
WOMEN
DO IT **DAILY**

rejuvenation. You name it, as a features journalist for the past two decades, I'll have written about it. Even poo, yes poo. But poo, who cares? Women make riffs about that all the time. Look at that scene in *Bridesmaids*. But what of the gags about female "squirters" — or "prune fingers" as *Esquire's* own agony uncle AA Gill puts it. Where, pray tell, were THEY? It's only the nutters, see, like Natalie Portman in *Black Swan* and Naomi Watts in *Mulholland Drive* who do that.

Pleasure without a purpose, so birth expert Sheila Kitzinger once pointed out, is always going to be a threatening thing to society, however liberating it may feel.

Or as a perfectly third-wave feminist friend put it, recoiling slightly, when I told her what I had been commissioned to write about: "Ewww. Do you really need the money that bad?"

Here are the facts, according to the Kinsey Institute in the US: roughly 95 per cent of men admit to doing it compared to 89 per cent of

SEX

women (bearing in mind these findings are based on women who agree to talk about it in the first place); 40 per cent of men admit to doing it every day compared to 22 per cent of women. The average female orgasm lasts three seconds longer than the male one, and only 30 per cent of us can achieve one vaginally as opposed to clitorally; 10 per cent of us claim never to have had them at all and one per cent of us, apparently, can achieve them, just by touching our breasts. Men prefer doing it in the shower, while we prefer doing it in bed, and roughly 52 per cent of us use vibrators to get there. One woman I spoke to said she could do it just by tensing her thighs, and has done

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so often in the university library unnoticed. Another said she could only do it with the feel of her duvet. Another said she did it in swimming pools where the water jets came out. Yet another said she did it in traffic jams. A few said they did it while they had their partners right next to them in bed and safely snoring.

In two studies I unearthed in *With the Hand: A Cultural History of Masturbation* by Mels van Driel, it was revealed that more than 50 per cent of women masturbated at work compared to 60 per cent of men and that the toilet was the preferred repository. That was Scandanavia, though.

So why do we do it? Well, much for the same reasons as you and then some. To get ourselves off to sleep; to ease curse pains; to stop the hiccups (yes! Try it!); to keep our sexuality alive: “Like,” as one girlfriend helpfully puts it, “the Olympic flame”. Use it or lose it, and all.

Sometimes it's because we're plain bored. Sometimes it's because it's a nice little evening treat to which we can look forward. Sometimes it's to find an incentive to get our heads out of the fridge. And to grossly paraphrase Truman Capote, it doesn't exactly require a new frock or shaving one's legs.

Neither does it necessarily mean it's because we cannot get it any other way. Our

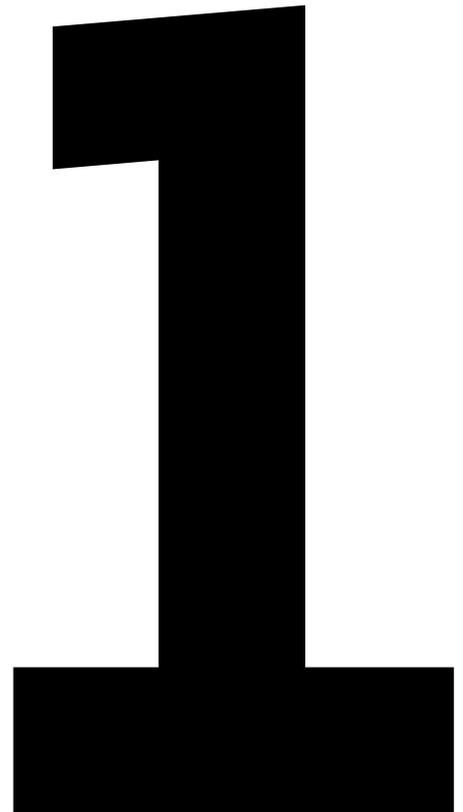
wanking lives, like yours, often lie parallel to our sex lives. Indeed, for many of us, the more we have sex with you, the more we need to do it on our own. The one compliments the other. And, without being cruel, statistically we get better results on our own than with someone else. Like they say, only 30 per cent of us can achieve orgasm by penetrative sex alone. We don't, as it were, need the other tennis player, so it would make sense, would it not, that sometimes it's better *toute seule*.

Actually, a lot of the time. Roughly 40 per cent prefer it to sex and according to one of my Oxford grads, it's “definitely better than a one-night stand”. Evidently, just like you, we need to be our own directors, to short-circuit, to cut to the chase. We savour the DHEA-fuelled glow seconds, even minutes afterwards where there's a sense of utter completeness, everything's right with the world and all that beckons is nice thoughts and sleep.

Indeed, according to one girlfriend I spoke to, that bit, the “glow” afterwards can sometimes be better than the *petite mort* (or “petite suicide” as it probably more accurately should be called) itself. “And have you ever filmed your face changing at the very moment?” she wonders, *sotto voce* because we are in a restaurant with people fore and aft: “Wouldn't that be the best you'll ever, ever look? A BlackBerry doesn't have the power, I've found, but an iPhone might.”

She, like almost all the women I know, is far more comfortable talking about shagging than wanking. The latter, it's so private, so hidden, so clever, it's almost as though, looking at it on the positive side, we don't want to give the secret away. For you men, apparently, it's exactly the other way round. While you might regale us and yourselves at the table with tales of tent poles under the bedsheets and soggy biscuits, the act of shagging, you'll hardly go there at all.

If we want to discuss ourselves doing it to ourselves... watch you lot form an orderly queue. It doesn't matter if we are not exactly Rosie Huntington-Whiteley, an admission of female wanking, or so it seemed



while researching this story, will bring out the listener in even the most boorish and disinterested of men. Am I wrong or isn't it somewhere up there with lesbians on the wank bank scale? Much more effective than the spanking scene in *Secretary* you've watched for the 355th time.

Honestly, though, your wank bank material, it's so, well, *basic* compared to ours. Aside from one man I know whose fantasies have to start at least with dinner, if not cocktails, pick-up lines, menu orders and all, your sexual fantasy never seems to get more elaborate than the “in the shower, from behind” kind.

Meg Wolitzer put it rather well in her novel *The Uncoupling*: “Men... [can] masturbate forever to an ancient swimsuit picture of the now-dead Farrah Fawcett but women need

MORE THAN

50%
DO IT
AT WORK

0% OF WOMEN CAN DO IT BY TOUCHING THEIR BREASTS

“But yes,” she admits, “I was terribly self-conscious while I did that. I had pretty severe performance anxiety, which I pushed through. I had to do it twice though, because they said once was not enough...”

Performance anxiety! Hell-oooooo! Isn't that the most compelling incentive for doing it solo — if we are not experts at faking it, that is — not having to worry about your getting lockjaw or going limp?

“Feeling good is not an accident. If we didn't need to, then we wouldn't have the apparatus to do so.” So pronounces New York columnist and author Carole Radziwill, famously outspoken on the subject and currently writing a book entitled *The Widow's Guide to Sex and Dating*. “It's such a natural, biological instinct. But then I'm not ashamed of it, it's not a secret for me. If you can't talk about it, isn't that a little bit like being a drug addict or an alcoholic, hiding bottles around the house? I say do it until you need glasses.”

something more. If Farrah Fawcett were a dark-eyed, well-built man and he reached out from that picture and said: ‘I would like to spend a lazy committed day with you, just the two of us,’ then women could masturbate to it forever too.”

Those sex scenes in *Fish Tank*, meanwhile, Michael Fassbender having his way with the mother and then with the daughter, or the ones with Mark Ruffalo and Meg Ryan in *In the Cut*? Whoa. If those are not incentives for a “freelancer's lie-down”, what is?

Which brings us neatly onto the topic of vibrators. No, I have never owned one. The double AAs in my top drawer are absolutely for my Dictaphone. Imagine, just imagine, the poor cleaning lady having to come across *that*. (As it is, typing in the words “female” and “masturbation” so many times has me in a constant state of low-level worry that the police might come in and seize my computer.) I sympathise greatly with the colleague who balked when a friend asked her to bring one over for her from the States. Even though it looked like a lipstick container and had been shipped to the hotel in plain wrapping, it's contraband, no? It's not that I'm a prude, far from it, ask any of my friends, but the sorts of women who are open about stuff like that, the sorts who vocalise their rights about this sort of thing in mixed company? Well, let's say they tend to be... what's the word I'm searching for? American, maybe?

Case in point is *Washington Post* writer Kayt Sukel, a former science undergrad at Harvard, who masturbated while inside an MRI scanner in order to have her brain

mapped at the point of orgasm. “Yes, it's still very much a taboo,” says Sukel, who ended up writing a book about it, *Dirty Minds: How Our Brains Influence Love Sex and Relationships*.

“And I think a lot of it has to do with the notion that we hold so fast to stereotypes that women should only have sexual pleasure within the confines of a monogamous relationship. Once we remove the man from that equation, people get uncomfortable. And they shouldn't! Obviously, it's something that just about everyone does and it's a very healthy form of sexual expression.

10% HAVE NEVER HAD ONE

“A lot of women are embarrassed about exploring themselves and about using a vibrator because they subscribe to the myth that the only women who do that are the women who can't get a man.” So speaks Allison England, 26, a sales assistant at the erotic boutique Coco de Mer. It is late in the afternoon and the pair of us are sitting precariously on something called a Tally Ho, a long leather couch designed by Mark Brazier-Jones, with stirrups for “added access”. Allison, a native of Wyoming, is neither single nor rattling with piercings, but she has an unsettlingly level gaze and not-so *sotto voce* while talking about G-spots, lube and the like.

Spread out beside her is an array of her current favourite products, one of which, a U-bend-like glass dildo that comes with its own stand, reminds me of the designer wine decanter I nearly splashed out on for my other half last Christmas. According to England, this is the best one for achieving female ejaculation and because it is made of glass can be cleaned in the dishwasher.

Then there is something called the G-Ki, another good one, she explains quite loudly, for locating one's G-spot, which you can adjust to suit your anatomy, although only when switched on, else it will break (so beware, because if there is one used gadget you can't flog on eBay, it is this). Me, I'm slightly more interested in a shiny cut-out corset belt near the front of the shop — it would go with so many things. Do I end up making a transaction? Yes, I can't leave with nothing. You really want to know? OK, I bought a G-Ki — but isn't that sort-of private? 🍌