

Health: The New Sex Symbol



From the biological basis for attraction to the underpinnings of head-turning good looks - an exploration into the compelling connections between vitality and sex appeal.

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To say that healthiness and sexiness are connected is, in many ways, to understate the obvious.

It's widely recognized, of course, that many conspicuous elements of physical attractiveness — things like shiny hair, clear eyes, smooth skin, a fit body — have their natural roots in physiological health. And yet, both the true depth and complexity of the connection between good health and perceived sexiness remain largely undersold.

In reality, it would be virtually impossible to overstate the profusion of health factors that play a role in what we think of as "sex appeal." Scientific studies have demonstrated that everything from miniscule variations in body symmetry to the concentrations of various hormones in our bloodstream can affect whether or not we are perceived as attractive to others.

In fact, there are whole realms of scientific inquiry around the theory of "sexual selection," which concerns itself primarily with establishing the ways in which the fitness-seeking mating habits of our own and other species have guided social behavior, sexual competition and genetic evolution.

Whether we like it or not, the state of our organ, endocrine and circulatory systems, our nervous and immune systems, our fertility — even the quality of our DNA — are constantly being broadcast to others by a variety of discernable (though sometimes invisible) physical characteristics. And we humans are far more sensitive at reading and responding to these variations, often on subconscious levels, than most of us would ever suspect.

To properly catalog and explain the myriad ways in which healthiness and sexiness intersect would be a giant and overwhelming endeavor. Charles Darwin only got a start on the fundamentals in his massive book, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (originally published in 1871), and since then, the scientific literature has expanded significantly. In just the last 25 years, the fields of evolutionary biology and psychology have themselves evolved dramatically, and our understanding of the dynamics of our own physiology has become considerably more detailed.

Of course, one doesn't need an encyclopedia of sexiness to observe and understand that good health is powerfully attractive. Still, it's a shame, really, that such a detailed and contemporary compendium isn't more accessible in a user-friendly format, because — let's face it — sex sells. If something promises to make us more appealing to others, in general, we want it.

Health sells, too, of course. But it sells along utilitarian lines — something like the appeal of Fruit of the Loom when compared to the appeal of Victoria's Secret.

Certainly, there's plenty to be said about the rewards of improving one's nutrition and digestion, of increasing one's immunity, or of reducing the risk of, say, heart disease, diabetes or osteoporosis. These are all important, worthy and potentially life-saving enterprises. Described in such "100 percent cotton" terms, however, these good-health endeavors sound far less sexy than they are. And it's arguable that if more people understood how being a bit healthier could render them, among other things, a bit sexier, then more people just might find themselves more deeply invested in achieving better health.

At least, that's the line of reasoning that inspired this article.

Below, you'll find a quick glimpse into just a few of the personal-health factors that can render us sexy or unsexy on various levels. You'll also discover some very interesting facts about our instinctive attraction to health indicators of which we may not even be consciously aware.

At no point will this article argue that the quest for enhanced sexiness is necessarily the very best or most meaningful health motivation available to us. Certainly, the quest for health has a great many practical inspirations. And to be sure, there are some for whom sex really is the last thing on their minds.

But if the scientific observations are even remotely accurate, the dynamics of sexual attraction are a matter of some interest to most of us — whether or not we like to admit it.

And whether we happen to be casting about for a mate, polishing our self-image, searching out a wider range of compelling health motivations or pursuing deeper insight into our own species' most basic instincts, most of us can benefit from understanding the ways that sexiness and healthiness overlap.

So if you're interested — for whatever reason — in knowing more about healthiness, sexiness, or the best of both worlds, by all means, read on.

Sexual Selection 101

Darwin's "survival of the fittest" theory explained a lot about natural selection and evolutionary adaptations. But it didn't explain everything. Take, for example, the male peacock's flashy but hopelessly unwieldy tail. That tail, which makes the peacock an easy target for predators and presents a major metabolic inefficiency, would seem likely to have weeded him out of the evolutionary chain long ago.

Instead, it appears to have contributed to his evolutionary success. Specifically, it contributed to his breeding success — because that gorgeous tail apparently makes male peacocks more attractive to their female counterparts (known as peahens), who select their mates, at least in part, on the basis of the size and appearance of their rear-end appendages.

Now, before we criticize the peahen for judging the peacock's book by its iridescent cover, we should take note of an important fact — namely, that the beauty of a peacock's tail just so happens to be reliably correlated with the quality of a peacock's heritable genetic potential. The size, symmetry and splendor of that bird's feathers are not just visually impressive, they're indicators of good genetic stock — a marker of what evolutionary-science scholars refer to as the bird's "general fitness."

So yes, the peahen is making a selection on the basis of what she finds attractive. But what she finds attractive bears a strong relationship to what she knows, instinctively, to be healthy.

This aspect of sexual selection flies in the face of what we've been taught about tooth-and-nail "survival of the fittest." But it's a perfect illustration of the sexual-selection dynamic that University of New Mexico evolutionary psychologist Geoffrey Miller, PhD, refers to as "reproduction of the sexiest."

In his book, *The Mating Mind: How Sexual Choice Shaped the Evolution of Human Nature* (Anchor, 2001), Miller explains many fascinating intricacies of sexual selection, including this counterintuitive insight: The fact that a peacock's tail represents an obstacle to survival is, in fact, an essential component of the bird's perceived attractiveness. Specifically, that a given bird can survive in the wild — even with the "handicap" of his totally impractical tail — is an indicator of that bird's above-average physical and mental fitness. Without them, presumably, he could not have outrun and outwitted the many potential predators that might otherwise have struck him down before his prime. All of which is to say that there's some very discerning instinctive logic behind the peahen's apparently superficial preference.

But, of course, we're not primarily concerned with peacocks and peahens here, and neither is Miller. In fact, his book deals mostly with subtler aspects of sexual selection in human beings, such as our preferences based on perceived intellectual, emotional and character traits. But we'll come back to that in a moment.

For now, let's return our attention to the matter of physical health and fitness, and the powerful roles they play in how we humans regard each other — and ourselves.

The Beguiling Body

In her book *Survival of the Prettiest: The Science of Beauty* (Anchor, 1999), psychologist Nancy Etcoff, PhD, explains why the pursuit of beauty is so deeply ingrained in all animal instinct (including human), and how it plays out in — among other things — a strong preference for symmetry in facial and body features. "Symmetry is tied to beauty," she writes, "because it acts as a measure of overall fitness."

In the world of evolutionary psychologists and biologists like Miller and Etcoff, the term "fitness" has a broader meaning than it does in the general culture. In the realm of sexual selection, Miller explains, it refers to "an organism's propensity to survive and reproduce in a particular environment." That propensity may include aspects of physical fitness, health and attractiveness, but also mental and emotional capacities — and the quality of the organism's underlying genetic material.

Symmetry is a reliable indicator of this "general fitness" because, as Etcoff explains, it speaks for an individual's resiliency against all kinds of potentially damaging stressors, "including inbreeding, parasites and exposure to radiation, pollutants, extreme temperatures or marginal habitats [that] can interfere with the precise expression of developmental design during the growth of symmetrical traits such as horns, antlers, petals, tails, wings, ankles, feet, faces or whole bodies."

In other words, whatever kind of animal you are, if you wind up as a symmetrical adult in decent condition, it suggests you've been successful in the face of all kinds of potential adversity. And if you've been successful, then there's a good chance you have some pretty decent genetics going for you. Thus, you make an attractive candidate for a mate.

Even in our modern society, of course, many of the same characteristics that represent good breeding potential still translate to basic sex appeal. This is why, at core, so many of the traits we think of as attractive equate with (or at least suggest) good health. It is also why the absence of apparent health can be such a powerful turn-off. "Skin and hair, so sexy and glorious when healthy, are repellent when not," writes Miller in *The Mating Mind*.

Of course, visible characteristics like feature symmetry, smooth skin, good muscle tone, clear eyes and shiny hair are only the beginning. But all speak loudly for the presence of adequate nutrition, good circulation and efficient detoxification — without which, a great variety of unattractive problems can ensue (see "Why Healthy Is Hot," below). Consider the visual appeal of conditions such as toenail fungus, open sores, jaundiced skin, patchy hair and bloodshot eyes, and you have a sense of the health-equals-attractiveness dynamic.

But our vision is only one sense among many, and we also use our senses of hearing, taste, touch and smell to discern the markers of health in potential mates. Our brains are capable of processing all these channels of information simultaneously, and as Malcolm Gladwell demonstrates in *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (Little, Brown & Co., 2005), most of us are eminently capable of making decisions on the basis of such combined sensory information — without even batting an eye.

The Nose Knows

Our ability to quickly discern health and fitness indicators (including complex genetic and immune characteristics) on the basis of smell alone is quite astonishing. Take what's become affectionately known as the "Stinky T-shirt Study," conducted in 1996 by Claus Wedekind, a zoologist at the University of Bern in Switzerland.

The study involved 44 men, each of whom wore a single T-shirt for two nights in a row. Wedekind then supplied the T-shirts to a group of women and asked them to select the T-shirts that appealed to them.

The women reliably preferred the scents of men who — as demonstrated by genetic testing — had immune systems dissimilar to their own, and who would thus be likely to produce the broadest combined spectrum of immune function in the case of potential offspring. In other words, the women's noses led them to make what would be a healthy reproductive choice. (This was not true of the women taking hormonal contraceptives; they tended to choose the shirts of men whom they described as smelling like their father or brother.)

If we are naturally capable of discerning complex immune characteristics using only our sense of smell, it's not difficult to imagine how effectively we might sniff out other markers of health, disease and all kinds of other subtle states to boot. Many vegans, for example, swear they can smell meat-eaters from yards away. Some men assert they can identify an ovulating woman from the sweet smell of her breath. Studies in mice confirm an uncanny ability to make mate-selection choices on the basis of the presence of specific peptides in urine. And while human studies exploring our reactions to pheromones remain somewhat

inconclusive, our responses to a vast variety of hormonal fluctuations leave little doubt about our ability to perceive equally subtle physiological fluctuations of all kinds.

While healthy and compatible bodily aromas are mightily attractive, of course, unhealthy and incompatible aromas can be downright repulsive. And while millions are spent on perfumes, colognes, deodorants, soaps and other fragranced products designed to enhance or mask our body's own olfactory signatures, none can effectively compensate for the very unsexy odors given off when our bodies are in a state of diminished health.

Bad breath, flatulence and offensive body odor can result from a variety of health conditions, including compromised digestion, inadequate detoxification, disrupted metabolism, endocrine imbalances, parasitic infections and the presence of necrotic (decaying) tissue.

In her book *Digestive Wellness: How to Strengthen the Immune System and Prevent Disease Through Healthy Digestion* (McGraw-Hill, 2005), Elizabeth Lipski, PhD, a clinical nutritionist, catalogs a multitude of such health conditions, laying out their underlying causes and unappealing symptoms, as well as their cures. Many of the symptoms of compromised digestion, she notes, lead to other health conditions — like gas and bloating, halitosis, and psoriasis — that negatively affect individuals' perceived attractiveness and self-esteem.

"Some chronic health problems, like irritable bowel syndrome, prevent many of my patients from dating altogether," says Lipski. "Others suffer social anxiety as the result of bad breath, excessive flatulence or eczema."

Lipski describes the case of a man suffering from a parasitic bowel infection that resulted in a chronic case of flatulence so bad it caused both coworkers and potential dates to keep their distance. She describes others for whom nutrient deficiencies contributed to everything from cheilosis (cracking at the corners of the mouth and lips) to premature aging of the skin.

The reversal of these problems can often be quickly and reliably accomplished only by resolving their underlying health issues (the man with the parasitic infection, for example, required only 10 days of treatment). "When our bodies present symptoms," notes Lipski, "they are trying to get our attention. So rather than covering up a symptom with mouthwash or moisturizer, it makes sense to look for and treat the underlying issues."

Going to the Source

"We're programmed to look for cosmetic camouflage for things like dull skin, brittle hair and thin, splitting nails," says certified nutritionist Ann Louise Gittleman, PhD, CNS, author of *The Living Beauty Detox Program: The Revolutionary Diet for Each and Every Season of a Woman's Life* (HarperCollins, 2001) and dozens of other health books. "But in reality, virtually all the things we think of as beautiful are essentially representative of an inner state of health and balance."

In Gittleman's view, becoming authentically healthy calls for a program of proper nutrition and exercise, detoxification, and hormone balancing, as well as careful management of stress, emotional wellness and other mind-body-spirit concerns. "You can't separate how you look from who you are," she says.

Indeed, what most of us think of as "a healthy glow" is rooted in a quality of radiance produced by, among other things, good capillary action and oxygenation of the blood, a translucent dewiness of the skin, a clarity and shininess of the eyes — all of which indicate the health of our organ, endocrine and circulatory systems. But that glow is also often rooted in personal demeanor of openness, optimism and approachability.

"That kind of radiance is partially the result of balanced hormones, adequate nutrients and a clean, resilient system," says Gittleman, "but it's also a certain quality of spirit and energy shining through."

This brings us to another interesting aspect of the healthy-equals-sexy equation: the way that markers of good health not only create an appealing physical container, but also represent the possession of other appealing internal qualities and characteristics.

Think back to the peacocks. Their robust tails are attractive not just for their visual beauty, but because they "advertise" other desirable traits — such as disease resistance and cleverness — that presumably contributed to their success in the face of environmental challenges.

It's not so different with us, except that our contemporary environmental challenges have less to do with natural dangers and more to do with lifestyle trends like unhealthy eating and lack of physical activity.

"In our culture, there's a major food surplus, and it's easy to get more than enough to eat," explains Miller. "Given the kinds of temptations and tendencies we all face on a daily basis, if a person makes it to 30 or 40 years old and hasn't developed some kind of obvious weight problem, we are inclined to conclude that he or she possesses certain personal characteristics, including self-restraint, willpower, discernment and self-esteem, for example."

We may also be inclined to make some assumptions about a person's mental health, Miller notes. "Being fit sends the message, 'I'm not depressed,'" he explains. "People with major psychosis tend not to be in good shape because they are preoccupied. They tend to gain excess weight, lose unhealthy amounts of weight or smoke."

It is, perhaps, mostly in this respect that we can speak of health as a "new" sex symbol. Evidently, health has been sexy for a long, long time. But in the current cultural environment of rampant obesity and other "lifestyle-related" diseases, the achievement of good health and fitness has become an increasingly rare, desirable and differentiating trait.

Faking Fitness

Given how much we read into perceived well-being, it should come as no surprise that we invest deeply in goods and services that help us exaggerate our current state of health and fitness, or at least enhance our appearance of vitality. Of course, in many cases, these interventions (think cosmetics, tanning booths, hair plugs, plastic surgery and steroids) don't actually improve our condition in any meaningful way — and, in some cases, they can even put our true health and vitality at risk. But they advertise characteristics we associate with health and, thus, with desirability.

Miller is currently working on a new book, in fact, that explores how we use consumer goods and services to look younger, fitter and more attractive — in effect, as he says, "to give the impression that we are doing better than we are."

Such fitness-faking can only take us so far, though. Because when our underlying health suffers — as it does in the case of anorexia, poor cardiovascular health, diabetes or cancer — so does the vitality that makes sexual attraction interesting in the first place.

For better or for worse, our sexual function and desire are also dependent on our general health. Hormonal and neurological imbalances, chronic diseases, depression, fatigue, and health problems of all kinds can radically reduce both our desire for sex and our ability to enjoyably engage in it.

In her book, *I'm Not in the Mood: What Every Woman Should Know About Improving Her Libido* (HarperCollins, 1999), Judith Reichman, MD, describes the "Seven Sexual Saboteurs" that interfere with a satisfying sex life. The majority of them (four of the seven to be precise) are health-related — and that's if you don't count "psychological issues" as a health concern.

Late-night TV is awash in commercials for prescription drugs designed to reverse or mask the symptoms of various sexual "dysfunctions" — many of which prove to be circulatory or hormonal in nature. But even if this or that drug succeeds in resolving your or your partner's primary symptoms, there's another little problem to worry about: Before taking a certain erectile-dysfunction drug, the spokesperson cautions, you should check with your doctor to make sure "you're healthy enough to have sex."

It turns out that many of the chronic conditions and diseases that contribute to sexual dysfunction — things like diabetes and heart disease — can also contribute to your early demise should you suddenly over-exert yourself.

Making It Real

But let's leave questions of "faked fitness" aside now and return to the matter of real health and fitness. While we've only scratched the surface of the variables underlying our genetically preprogrammed tendencies toward sexual selection, it should by now be clear that what's perceived as sexy (and what's not) can very often be closely linked with what's healthy (and what's not).

It should also be clear that we're not talking exclusively about the health and soundness of the body, but rather, of the appeal of a person as a whole. Yes, unhealthy habits lead to distinctly unsexy signals (from tooth decay and yellowed eyes to flatulence and snoring), while healthy habits tend to engender sexiness (a vital, energetic body; attractive skin and hair; an appealing aroma). The deeper message, though, is that there's something inherently sexy about a person who keeps himself or herself healthy — not the least of which are the healthy values, disciplines and discernments their apparent health broadcasts on their behalf.

Naturally, physical health and fitness is by no means the best or only indicator of a potential mate's inherent qualities, and they are by no means the only things that attract us. One of Miller's chief areas of interest in *The Mating Mind*, in fact, concerns the mental and moral traits we seek out in potential mates — things like intelligence, humor, creativity and generosity.

"When people are initially attracted," asserts Miller, "it is often on the basis of predictable physical characteristics: ratios and symmetries of body parts and facial features; the healthy appearance of muscle, skin, hair; and so on. But when they fall in love, it tends to be with mental and moral traits."

And when they break up, he adds, "it's generally not because someone suddenly got physically ugly, but because someone is revealing that they have a bad personality, a personal vice, addiction, lack of honesty, or is less interesting than they originally seemed to be."

Well-adjusted individuals are inclined to seek out potential mates whom they intuit will be advantageous and enjoyable partners — generally as the result of possessing desirable mental, emotional, moral and physical traits. We are on the lookout, in other words, for potential mates who will enhance our own "general fitness" — our own "propensity to survive and reproduce in a particular environment."

When we encounter individuals willing and able to go through the steps it takes to keep themselves healthy (good nutrition, regular exercise, a decent sleep schedule, manageable priorities), it's understandable that we endow them with all kinds of presumed strengths. And whether we are right or wrong about our first impressions, those impressions act powerfully on our choices.

The Deeper Appeal

Ultimately, even though our quest for sexiness may be biologically preprogrammed, on a deeper level, it's really about developing and seeking out what's best in us as human beings — in our bodies, but also in our minds, emotions, spirits and traits of character.

We all face aging and health challenges that diminish our physical vitality over time. Some of us also face catastrophic injuries, diseases and health crises that make concerns with appearance and attraction seem out of reach or almost entirely inconsequential. But each of us can cultivate the qualities — from discernment and self-restraint to resiliency and self-esteem — that help engender good health and fitness. We can treat with care, respect and appreciation the miraculous bodies with which we all are blessed from birth. And very often, when we do this, our most unique and irresistible brand of beauty shines through.

In *The Living Beauty Detox Program*, Gittleman emphasizes this notion with a quote from the French artist Auguste Rodin, who observed: "Beauty is but the spirit breaking through the flesh."

The vagaries of sexual selection may never be entirely revealed to us, and many of us will never possess — or be able to "fake" — certain desirable physical attributes that might render us sexier to others. All of us, however, can become responsible and motivated stewards of the bodies, hearts, minds and spirits with which we are endowed. And in this way, we can cultivate the kind of uncategorizable appeal that will perhaps always reside beyond the decisive grasp of science, but that most of us would love to have forever within our own arms' reach.

Why Healthy is Hot

Health factors	Good function supports ...	When compromised, results in ...
Nutritional intake	Smooth skin, shiny hair, clear eyes, general vitality, proper body composition, weight management, good energy and metabolism	Tissue and organ breakdown, dull hair, brittle nails, skin conditions, premature aging, undesirable weight gain or loss, susceptibility to disease
Digestion	Proper nutrient assimilation (see above), regular elimination, good detoxification (see below)	Gas and bloating; bad breath; body odor; rashes; nutritional deficiencies (see above); fatigue; reduced resistance to parasitic, fungal and bacterial infections
Detoxification	Clear complexion, radiant and smooth skin, shiny eyes, appealing aroma, proper body composition	Acne, rashes, dark circles, yellowed or bloodshot eye whites, dull skin, pallor, puffiness, blotchiness, bloating, fat accumulation and hormone disruption, indigestion, eczema, psoriasis, flora imbalances resulting in yeast infections
Endocrine function	Clear, smooth skin; good energy and metabolism; proper hormone balance and libido; appealing aroma; good mood	Weight gain, acne, body odor, hair loss, lethargy, reduction of libido and sexual function, depression
Circulatory function	Rosy, healthy skin; robust energy; healthy tissue; good support of muscle tone, nerve health and proper sexual function	Pallor, ruddiness, necrotic lesions, loss of sensation, low energy, muscle atrophy, nerve damage, sexual dysfunction