



**Episode 37 – Time to Get Aroused?**  
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**Music and audio by Jeremy Dahl**

Note: This is the script used to create the episode with references added. It has typos. It is not a transcript, but the audio sticks pretty close to the writing.

**Intro**

Welcome to Do We Know Things? A podcast where we examine things we think we know about sex.

Content warning: This podcast will talk about sex and genitals.

Hi everyone! I am Dr. Lisa Dawn Hamilton, professor of psychology and sex educator. Today on Do We Know Things, what is peak arousal and how long does it take to get there?

**Intro**

In the world of sex advice, there is a major focus on cisgender, heterosexual couples. We are told (and sold) that men are from Mars and women are from Venus, and this creates a big market for sex advice focusing on the differences. No wonder mixed sex partners might feel they don't understand how to please the alien being they are having sex with!

One bit of sex advice I have seen floating around the internet, particularly on Instagram, is that it takes cisgender women 20 minutes to get fully aroused. This is presented as a contrast to cisgender men, who I guess are faster than that? I never see any man-stats presented, but it is implied that men need to slow down to ensure their female partner gets to her fully aroused state. Fully aroused for what, exactly, I am not sure.

Recently, a clinician friend who had learned about the 20-minute guideline asked me if it was true, and off the top of my head, from the lab-based genital research I was aware of, I thought there was no difference in time to peak genital arousal. I did want to actually dig into the research though, particularly to try to figure out where this 20-minute stat came from. Is there any evidence it is true? In this episode, are there gender/sex differences when it comes to time for arousal? Why the question itself doesn't make sense and I'll offer some sex tips of my own.

That's coming up on Do We Know Things?

**What do we mean when we talk about arousal?**

As I started investigating the timing to arousal, I had so many questions. Most notably, what is does it mean to be fully aroused? Is it specifically the physical aspects of arousal? Is it the psychological aspects? Is it a mixture of both?

When thinking about peak arousal, many people might automatically think orgasm – i.e. how long does it take a person to get to orgasm? But, people with vulvas can orgasm without being at fully aroused. When desired, a vibrator can potentially knock one out in 30 seconds or less for many people. When that happens, it is likely our bodies and brains didn't get to a state of peak arousal. Additionally, people with penises can have orgasms without being fully erect, so if we are talking about genital arousal, then clearly peak arousal isn't necessary for orgasm.

But then it leads me to the question of if we are talking about being fully physically aroused, what body parts indicate that? Is it penile erection? Testicular retraction or swelling? Clitoral erection? Vaginal lubrication? Pelvic tension? All of the above?

For psychological arousal, there really isn't an easy way to measure that. I mean likely each individual knows when they are fully psychologically aroused, but it can be hard to measure that in any meaningful way. Being fully psychologically aroused usually means being very turned on mentally and fully present in the sexual moment. But how do you tease it apart from the physical aspects. There is a feedback loop between the psychological and the physical that can't easily be separated.

I decided to start with the physical side of things because that is the easiest to actually quantify.

## **Masters and Johnson**

I knew my first stop had to be the 1966 book by Masters and Johnson called Human Sexual Response (Masters & Johnson, 1966). You may know about Masters and Johnson from the fictionalized TV show about them called Masters of Sex. If you aren't familiar with them, William Masters and Virginia Johnson were researchers who began their work on sexual response in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. They assessed as many physiological aspects of sexual response as possible and, by their own report, they measured over 10,000 arousal and orgasm responses in their laboratory by the time the book was published. They measured heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure, and genital responses. They assessed nipple erections, skin colour changes, and vaginal, cervical, and testicular movement. I thought if anyone could answer a question about physical arousal, they could.

I was wrong! I haven't read the book in over a decade, so I was surprised to find they did not report a time to peak arousal for their participants. They did however describe what it looked like. In their research, Masters and Johnson divide sexual response into what they call the Human Sexual Response cycle. This cycle, which is actually more linear than cyclic, includes 4 phases.

Arousal is divided into two phases; the first is called excitement. This phase includes many physical changes, but specific the genitals involves lubrication of the vaginal barrel (as they call it), an increase in blood flow to the genital region, which stays there – a phenomenon called

vasocongestion. This results in a darkening of vaginal walls and labia minora. The excitement phase also includes lengthening of the vagina and shifting of the uterus to make more space near the cervix. Although they didn't report time to fully aroused, Masters and Johnson did report that it took about 10-30 seconds for the vaginal walls to become lubricated once sexual stimulation began. They never actually define what sexual stimulation means, but I assume it is any sexually related physical contact either with the self or a partner.

I do think it is important to emphasize that lubrication is the first sign of arousal, not an indicator of being fully aroused. Of course, lubrication can increase as someone becomes more aroused.

For penises, the excitement phase involves becoming erect and the pelvic region generally increasing in blood flow and vasocongestion. Scrotums become thicker and tenser, and testes start to lift up towards the body.

The second arousal phase is called plateau, and this is what Masters and Johnson would describe as being fully aroused. During this phase, the labia minora are fully engorged and, at least in the almost exclusively white (approx. 95%) participants studied by Masters and Johnson, are deeply red or purple in hue. In this phase the visible parts of the clitoris retract under the clitoral hood, and the lower third of the vagina becomes dramatically engorged.

During the plateau phase, the coronal ridge, which is the ridge that separates the head from the shaft of the penis becomes more pronounced and the head of the penis darkens in colour. Testes get bigger and go even closer to the body. There is also the release of some fluid from the Cowper's gland, which is what we usually refer to as pre-cum.

Stage 3 in this cycle is orgasm, and Stage 4 is resolution, which is when the body returns to its pre-excitement state.

The only info I could find about time to being fully aroused in Masters and Johnson's book was a brief reference to when the labia minora become fully engorged and the colour has changed. They say "a similarly responding male has long since achieved full penile erection, and quite possibly a moderate degree of elevation of at least one testicle" (p. 50). This clarifies that erection can occur more quickly than a vulva becomes fully aroused, but it also indicates that erection doesn't mean that the penis-haver is fully aroused either, since other parts of the body, like the testes haven't reached their fully aroused state.

I included a lot of detail of what Masters and Johnson measured in their studies to show how complex it is to define "fully aroused" since it involves so many parts of the body. And I didn't even talk about the breathing, nipples, or other non-genital aspects!

I also want to be clear that the phases I described were based on a very limited sample of people and don't apply to everyone or to every experience of sexual arousal. Masters and Johnson's research has received a lot of criticism over the years. For one, their sample was very limited, mostly to middle-to-upper class white people. Secondly, they only included women in their sample who had a male-like response pattern. If a woman wasn't able to get aroused and have an orgasm in a laboratory setting, she could not be in the study. That is a very specific population of

women now, let alone in 1960 (Tiefer, 2004). There are many other problems with how they did their research, but it is still the most comprehensive study of the physiology of sexual response that has ever occurred. I think that is why we are still referencing it over 50 years later.

## **Modern Research**

What about research since Masters and Johnson? Lots of studies have measured genital arousal in the lab, but a lot of the research focuses on only one sex. Additionally, a lot of the research also shows people short, erotic videos of only 2-5 minutes. There have been a few studies that look at the response times to peak arousal of penises and vaginas in the same study and have erotic videos lasting for 10 – 15 mins, but these studies tend to use just ONE form of measurement, as compared to Masters and Johnson who assessed SO MANY THINGS.

The most common type of research uses vaginal photoplethysmography to assess vasocongestion in the vagina and penile plethysmography, which measures circumference of the penis, which is also a proxy for vasocongestion in the penis. Vaginas reach peak response quite quickly. In only 30 seconds to a couple of minutes. Penises take a bit longer, but still around 2-5 minutes. These studies show pretty consistently that penises and vaginas get to peak vasocongestion in the lab quickly, usually in 5 mins or less .

A major issue with this research, however is that the penis and the vagina are not analogous. The clitoris and the penis are much more similar in terms of physiology. Most of the clitoris is inside the body, which makes it hard to measure, and there are almost no studies that measure clitoral arousal, and none that have compared to penile arousal.

One alternative that is comparable across participants is thermography, which measures genital arousal using temperature. In these studies, a person reclines slightly and spreads their legs so a thermal imaging camera can take their genital temperature. In studies that directly compare time to peak arousal while measuring temperature of the genitals there are no differences in time to arousal measures. Depending on the study time to peak arousal can range from 7-12 minutes. Temperature also seems to better correspond with self-reported psychological arousal.

Something that is important to consider here is that all of these studies are done in highly artificial lab settings. Masters and Johnson had people come into the lab and masturbate or have sex, but the modern research all involves watching a video and not touching yourself. In a lab, there is also no pressure to perform. You just need to sit back, relax, and hopefully enjoy the erotic video. So, in terms of assessing peak arousal, we know in this context devoid of any physical stimulation, there doesn't seem to be much difference in time to arousal.

Thinking about the fact that we can't really measure arousal in real-life situations, and the fact that Masters and Johnson, who were obsessed with measuring all things physiological, didn't report any time-related numbers about arousal reminded me of the importance of context. There can be so much variability in sexual experiences, even with the same partner, that it doesn't really make sense to report on an average time for anyone to get fully aroused.

Think about your own sexual experiences, both solo and with someone else. Do you respond the same way all the time? Maybe if you are doing the same thing, but even then, external non-sexual factors can affect it. Sexual arousal is so contextual and psychological. Let's delve into those aspects.

## **Context and Psychology**

It is commonly said that the most important sex organ is your brain, and I agree. In order to get aroused, your brain needs to be in a place where it is receptive to arousing stimuli. There are so, so, so many contextual and psychological factors that go into getting aroused. I will not be able to cover them all here, but I created a list of my top 4 things to think about when it comes to how long it takes to become fully aroused. These examples are all focused on partnered sex.

### **1. Who is initiating the sexual activity?**

Sometimes there are times and places where sex is assumed to be happening by the parties involved, but in other cases, someone needs to be the sex initiator. If there are, say, 10 steps on the way to peak psychological arousal, the person who is initiating is likely already at a 3 or higher in their arousal journey by the time they initiate. To initiate sex, we likely have been thinking about it already, possibly imagining what we want to happen and how it might feel. This builds anticipation, which is great for arousal. If the other person in the sex journey has been focused on spreadsheets and budgeting for the last 2 hours, they are probably at a 0. The person who has not been thinking about sex needs time to shift from wherever their brain was into sexual arousal mode. This shifting of gears is easy for some people but can be challenging for others. Also, the speed of going from 0 to the initiator's level of arousal will vary from person to person.

### **2. Your individual arousal responsivity**

The Dual-Control Model of Sexual Response states that our ability to become aroused is controlled by two different systems in our body, an excitatory system and an inhibitory one (Kleinplatz & Ménard, 2020). In her book, *Come As you Are*, sex educator and author Emily Nagoski uses a car analogy to describe these systems, so you can think of them as your sexual brake and accelerator. The systems are independent meaning you can be high in both, low in both or high in one, low in the other and vice versa. Someone who is high in sexual excitation is someone who is aroused quickly and easily. Someone high in sexual inhibition easily hits the brakes on sexual arousal when distracted or worried or interrupted.

If someone has a sensitive accelerator and brake, they might be someone who is easily aroused when any sort of sexual stimuli or sexual invitation comes their way. The minute the sexual hint crosses their path, they are ready to hop in bed and get it on. But, having a sensitive brake also means that if they think the neighbours can hear, or if they are worried about pregnancy or STIs, or really any sort of distraction, it will put the brakes on arousal.

The level of inhibition and excitation is an individual difference and has many influences. This can absolutely affect how fast someone gets aroused.

### 3. The context for the sex

If you have been flirting with someone all night, or if you are on a date with your sweetie, or if you have scheduled your sex and been anticipating it all day, you are likely going to get aroused more quickly. Similar to the initiation point, the context leading up to the sex can get you started a few steps up the arousal scale. My favorite description of this was from sex coach Serena Haines who talks about “idling” your sex drive all day. The context for great sex usually starts well before any actual sex. It starts with flirting, sexting, your partner brushing up against you in a sensual way as you leave for work, compliments from your lover, the list goes on. In some cases you may have been low level aroused for HOURS, so it might take 1 minute of physical contact to get to maximum arousal.

If you crawl into bed after a long day after not connecting with your partner much and are tired, arousal will likely take longer than if you are very excited to have sex. If you are worried about a big presentation tomorrow at work, it is likely going to take longer to get aroused. I am sure you can come up with a ton of contexts where you are not primed for arousal.

To create a more arousing context when one or both people is not feeling like their head is in the sex game, it can be useful to slowly ease into it through kissing and teasing, or maybe a massage. Reading erotic stories or watching erotic videos can also help create the anticipation and increase arousal. Novelty also contributes to arousal. Whether that is having sex with a new partner or doing something new with a long term partner, adding novelty can increase arousal.

### 4. Your turn ons

This is context related, but more specific to individual desires. If your biggest turn on is being spanked and you are with someone who is very gentle in bed, it is probably going to take you a long time to get to peak arousal. If you want your partner to talk dirty to you, and they don't feel comfortable doing that, it's probably going to take you a long time to get to peak arousal. If you get most aroused to specific kinds of role play and that isn't available to you, it is probably going to take a while for you to get to peak arousal. You get my point.

Sex therapist and researcher Peggy Kleinplatz studies what makes sex great, and one of the things she talks about is “sex worth wanting” If the sex you are having doesn't involve the things that turn you on, it makes sense that arousal would take longer. I believe that everyone has specific things that really do it for them sexually. When those aspects are present during sex, it very likely increase both the speed and intensity of arousal. When we talk about sex differences in desire and arousal, its important to ask is the sex available to women in heterosexual relationships sex worth wanting.

All of these contextual and psychological factors really lead me to believe we it doesn't make sense put a number on how long it takes to get fully aroused because of all of the variability, even within one person. I might be wrong, and maybe there is a minimum amount of time needed, but I think it would be hard to assess because of the many reasons I have listed above.

## **Conclusion**

So, in all of my googling and research database searching, I never did find the source of the 20 minute rule. If you know where this came from, please reach out to me and let me know! I am going to put a call out on Instagram too to see if I can crowd source the answer. But I also think that even if I could find the source, it doesn't really matter because it is kind of meaningless. I am going to say, based on the evidence, there isn't a sex difference in how long it takes to get to maximum arousal. I think context and individual differences are more important than someones sex or gender.

I think the reason the message from sex educators on the internet is to slow down heterosexual sex is because it is so male-centric. The typical script for hetero sex is a bit of kissing and groping, and then going straight to penis-in-vagina sex. This, on average, prioritizes penis pleasure because the penis gets continued stimulation, and the clitoris for many people is not getting stimulated. To counter this, it helpful for people to have conversations with the people they are having sex with about what turns them on and what they need for their arousal.

Of course, talking about sex isn't straightforward or easy for many people. It can require vulnerability and feel awkward. There is a lot of shame tied up in talking about sex. I often wonder if that is why we educate about blanket statements, as a way of helping people not have to talk about their specific sexual desires and needs. We can point to something that say "See, women need 20 mins of stimulation to get aroused" even if we know there is a specific thing that would get us the most aroused. This is where sex coaches and therapists come in handy to help with sexual communication!

That's all for this episode. If you have any feedback or peer review of this episode, I am always excited to hear from you. You send me a voice memo recorded on your phone or just a written email to [doweknowthings@gmail.com](mailto:doweknowthings@gmail.com)

You can find a script for this episode with references and extra info on the website at [doweknowthings.com](http://doweknowthings.com)

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