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From Crunches to Climax

Emily Beers examines the physiology of exercise-induced orgasms, and female CrossFit athletes open up and talk about them.

By Emily Beers

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It was 1995, a time when crunches were the in-vogue ab exercise.

Wendy was a high-school student. Desperate for a flat stomach to flaunt during the upcoming summer, she started an abdominal routine in her living room.

Crunching away, she told herself the monotony would be well worth it.

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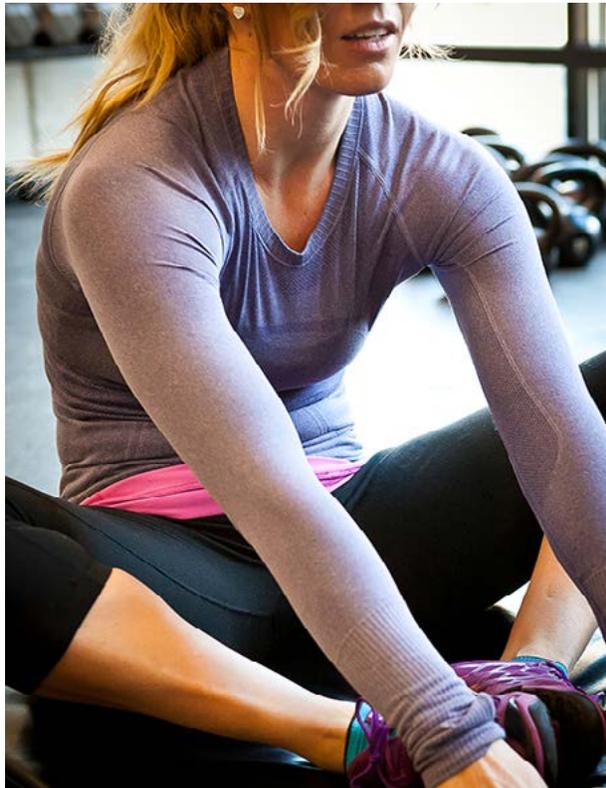
"From pain will come pleasure," Wendy remembers thinking. Twenty, 25, 30 crunches into her routine, and suddenly her body started to feel hot in an interesting new way. The friction from the constant crunching started to stimulate her pelvic region. Thirty-five, 40, 45 crunches into the workout, Wendy kept getting closer to climax with each crunch.

Wendy had just experienced her first crunch-induced orgasm.

At 52 crunches, her abdominal session ended abruptly—and involuntarily. She was flat on her back, breathing hard, her body half numb.

Wendy had just experienced her first crunch-induced orgasm.

In fact, it was her first orgasm ever.



Kim Bellavance Photographie

When the WOD Annie becomes interesting: some women find ab-focused workouts bring them to orgasm.

L-Sit Orgasms: Tabata-Style

Wendy isn't the only woman who can bring herself to orgasm during a workout. CrossFit females around the world have also reported experiencing arousal from certain movements, namely sit-ups, rope climbs and L-sits.

These orgasms are commonly referred to as "core-gasms," because the movements that bring them on are generally focused on the core or abdominals.

Erin from Calgary, Alta., is a CrossFit athlete with the propensity to orgasm mid-workout. For Erin, it began as a young teenager during ballet class.

"It was something that worked the lower abs. At the time, I didn't quite know what was happening and thought it was kind of strange," Erin said.

Workout orgasms disappeared from her life for a while after that, but they re-emerged with greater regularity than ever when she discovered CrossFit in her 20s. By then she was well aware of exactly what was going on in her body as she attempted her first max L-sit hold.

Today, not only does Erin find herself in full-blown orgasm mode after about a 30-second L-sit, but she can make it happen multiple times in a row.

"I generally can do about three or four, and then I can't physically hold the position to generate another orgasm," Erin confessed.

Erin goes so far as to suggest that her L-sit ability is intrinsically linked to her ability to orgasm.

"I haven't been able to get past 30 or 40 seconds of L-sits since I'm not really able to hold an L-sit anymore once I orgasm," she said.

"I generally can do about three or four, and then I can't physically hold the position to generate another orgasm."

—Erin from Calgary

An Anticlimactic Orgasm?

Females like Wendy and Erin have led to an interest in scientific research about females and exercise-induced orgasms.

In 2011, Indiana University conducted a study that included 530 women. It looked at women who admitted to both exercise-induced sexual pleasure (EISP) and exercise-induced orgasms (EIO).

The article produced from the study was written by Debby Herbenick and J. Dennis Fortenberry and titled [Exercise-Induced Orgasm and Pleasure Among Women](#). It was published in the peer-reviewed scholarly journal *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*. One of the study's participants listed CrossFit specifically as the stimulation that caused EISP, though more participants found general activities such as swimming or biking/spinning to be the source.

Like Wendy and Erin, the women who participated in this study also reported abdominal exercises provided the most common way to climax during a workout, and activities such as rope climbs and climbing poles and trees—whenever there is pressure on the pelvic region—also provided the necessary stimulation. Interestingly enough, lifting weights also ranked as a movement that can lead to orgasm.

“Sex may not be the only natural setting for women’s orgasm.”

— Herbenick and Fortenberry



Kim Bellavance Photographie

Situations like this might be related to the pubococcygeus muscle, which controls urine flow and contracts during orgasm.

As Herbenick and Fortenberry pointed out in their article, there is still so much we don't know about the female orgasm. But the concept of an exercise-induced orgasm suggests that perhaps female climax isn't entirely related to sexual experiences.

Evidence of this is the fact that the subjects in this study reported that sexual thoughts and fantasies are not often associated with either EIO or EISP.

"Orgasm occurs—perhaps even normally—outside of sexual settings and in the absence of sexual arousal or stimulation," Herbenick and Fortenberry suggested in the article.

Dr. Lori Brotto, a clinical psychologist, is both a member of the International Academy of Sex Research and runs a private sexual-health clinic. She agrees that exercise-induced orgasms are likely to be—at least somewhat—asexual in nature.



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Experiencing an orgasm while climbing rope may be a purely physiological reaction for many women.

"For the majority of women, psychological arousal and awareness must be present. However, we have evidence that orgasms can also be purely physiological. Many women will orgasm in their sleep, presumably without any psychological awareness. In these cases (as in the case of exercise-induced ones), they are purely physiological," Brotto said.

It could be very simple, explained Brotto: "Exercise increases sympathetic nervous system (SNS) activity and has been shown to heighten sexual arousal. Given the intensity of CrossFit, there is likely quite a surge in SNS activity . . . For women who are easily orgasmic, this might be just enough of a boost to their sympathetic activity to lead them to experience orgasm."

Similarly, in 2000, the *American Journal of Cardiology* published *Sympathetic Nervous System Activity and Female Sexual Arousal* by Cindy M. Meston. It was the first study that suggested female orgasms contain a "purely physiological component."

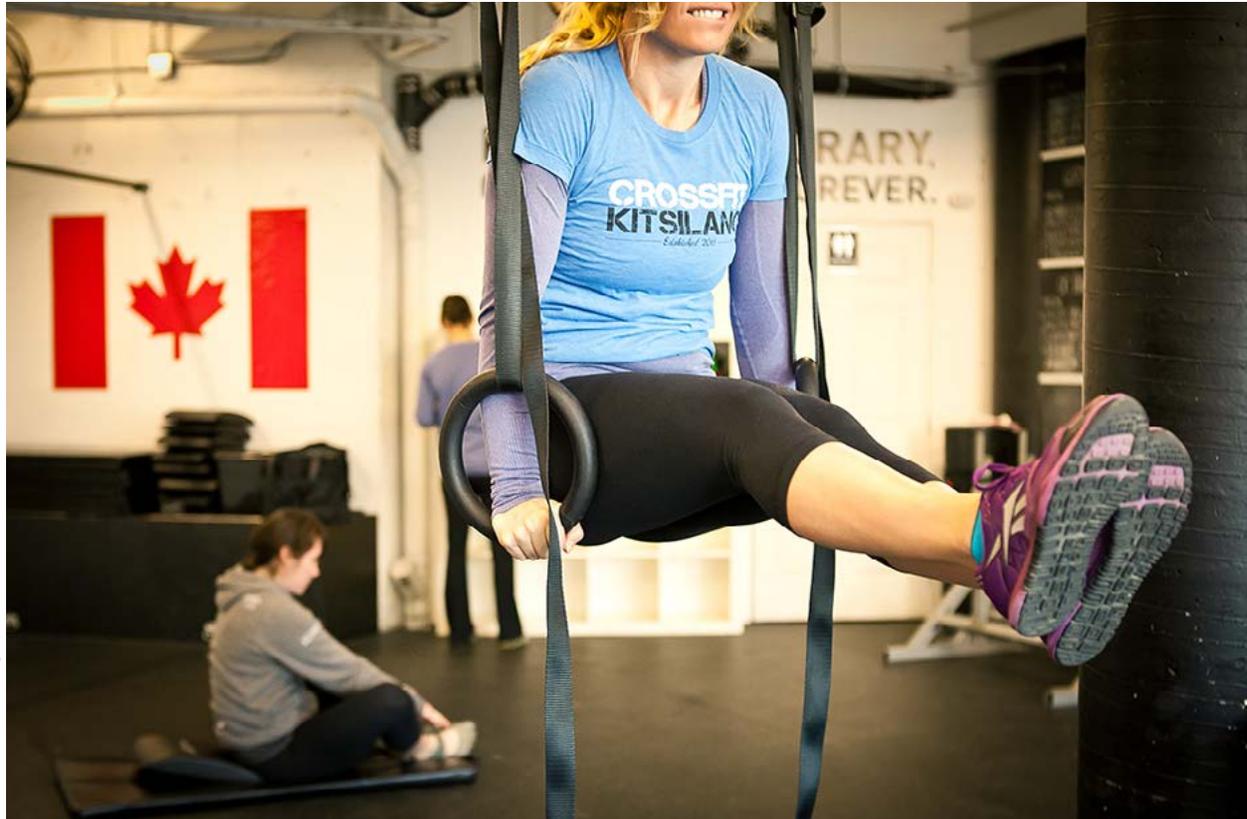
The study involved 35 sexually functional females, who were asked to exercise for 20 minutes on a stationary bike—working at 70 percent of their maximum volume of oxygen intake—before watching an erotic film.

Although exercise prior to watching the film did lead to an increase in both vaginal pulse amplitude (VPA) and vaginal blood volume (VBV), "there were no significant differences in sexual arousal, positive affect, or negative affect with exercise alone," Meston reported in the article.

At the end of the study, one of Meston's conclusions was as follows: "Exercise per se does not simply increase VBV and VPA responses, but, rather, exercise in the presence of an erotic stimulus somehow prepares the body for sexual arousal."

Furthermore, Meston suggested that there might be an optimal level of SNS activation to generate sexual arousal, and that levels below or above optimal may have less of an impact on—or even an inhibitory effect—on a female's sexual response.

This could be why Erin can have an orgasm during an L-sit, yet she says, "L-sits are still painful."



Kim Bellavance Photographie

Sadly, experiencing an orgasm does not make L-sits any more fun.

The Wet Filthy Fifty

Building on the point that female orgasms have purely mechanical components to them, Tony Leyland, an exercise physiologist from Simon Fraser University as well as an avid CrossFit athlete, suspects there might be a link between females who involuntarily urinate during workouts and females who have the propensity to orgasm while exercising.

“I always start the (Filthy Fifty) out wet and then have to ride it out for the next 20 minutes.”

—Wendy

A little bit about mid-workout female urination: Walk into any CrossFit box around the world and you'll discover hundreds of women who admit to losing control of their bladder during movements like box jumps and double-unders.

Wendy admits that she hates the Filthy Fifty workout.

“It's terrible. It starts with box jumps and then jumping pull-ups. I always start that workout out wet and then have to ride it out for the next 20 minutes. It's so uncomfortable.”

Leyland suggests a muscular link between involuntary urination and exercise-induced climax.

“The pubococcygeus muscle controls urine flow and contracts during orgasm, as well as being involved in core stability, so any tendency for orgasm may be linked to this muscle,” Leyland said.

A Reason to Study Sex and Exercise

As deviously sexy as mid-workout orgasms might have originally sounded, they are often less than glamorous. While you might expect Erin's favorite CrossFit workout to be "Tabata L-sits/Tabata orgasm," it certainly is not.

"I have better orgasms by actually having sex," she said.

Erin actually doesn't look forward to L-sits, partially due to embarrassment.

"Depending on the day, I dread them coming up, because, you know, it's not like I always want to orgasm in the middle of the workout. Not to mention that it is distracting to wonder if anyone has caught on to what's happening," Erin said.

This is part of the reason Herbenick and Fortenberry think we need to continue to study the female orgasm. It's part of educating women about what's going on in their bodies and ultimately reassuring them that orgasms in the gym don't make them weird or perverted.

Similarly, clinical psychologist Dr. Jocelyne Lessard believes studying things like exercise-induced orgasms can help us help women who desperately need it—like rape victims.

Lessard explained that while some women can only achieve orgasm when they're both stimulated mechanically in specific areas and are in the right mental headspace, other women orgasm involuntarily, as is the case for both Erin and Wendy.

"It may be a very physiological experience and therefore not necessarily linked to mood/ambiance etc., but rather their basic physiology," Lessard said.

"Some rape victims will surely attest to this," she continued. "There can be terrible guilt and self-recrimination from having responded physically to something so unwanted and awful, and that makes it all the more traumatic for these women or teen girls."

Herbenick and Fortenberry added: "To the extent that science can shed light on people's experiences with sex, it may help individuals to understand their experiences as normal rather than bizarre or obscene."

Similarly, female orgasmic disorder (FOD) can be found in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, suggesting the female orgasm is a combination of physical and mental factors. In the article [Female Orgasmic Disorder: "I'm Not Able to Climax"](#), both emotional and



Kim Bellavance Photographie

Although not as common as with more core-focused exercises, some women experience orgasms while lifting weights.

anatomical causes of FOD are suggested, and treatment can involve everything from counseling to Kegel exercises. Any research—exercise related or not—into the orgasm would certainly help treatment of the disorder.

Furthermore, orgasm is obviously related to sexual pleasure, though it's not always an essential part of it. Still, few people would decline any information that would lead to more frequent orgasms.

Roped In

Generally speaking, when females orgasm, they describe the sensation as a moment where their body gets hot or goes numb, or where they lose control of their physical selves as the surge of ecstasy rushes through them from head to toe.

Seeing as climbing trees, poles or ropes are three of the movements that can bring a female over the edge, one might assume there's a danger factor involved if an orgasm occurs while clinging onto a rope or tree for dear life. But Sharon, a CrossFit athlete who experienced her first mid-workout orgasm doing toes-to-bars, joined the "30-foot club" without incident.



The female orgasm is not totally understood, and research into exercise-induced climax might shed light on the subject.

“I was 30 feet in the air during a rope climb one time, and I couldn’t take it anymore.”

—Sharon

“I was 30 feet in the air during a rope climb one time, and I couldn’t take it anymore,” Sharon explained.

Despite her seemingly vulnerable position dangling in the air, it didn’t feel dangerous to her when she peacefully had an orgasm six inches from the ceiling of her gym.

“It’s an odd feeling in your body, as opposed to an all-encompassing kind of feeling,” Sharon added. “You’re more in control. It feels very muscular. I can feel them coming on, and if I continue doing reps, I’ll get to the point of climax. But if I had paused halfway up the rope, for example, I probably could have let it pass.”

But she didn’t let it pass, because she knew nobody was watching.

“I could tell nobody around me knew what was going on up there,” she said.

Have you experienced an exercise-induced orgasm during CrossFit? Which movements caused the orgasm? What did it feel like? Please post your thoughts to comments.



About the Author

*Emily Beers is a **CrossFit Journal** staff writer and editor who finished a master’s degree in journalism at the University of Western Ontario in the spring of 2009. Upon graduation, she worked as a sportswriter at the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic Games, where she covered figure skating and short-track speed skating. Currently, she hosts WOD HOG, a not-always-PG publication of the CrossFit Vancouver School of Fitness. She ruptured her Achilles tendon in December 2010 and served as the Canada West Regional Media Director while recovering from surgery. Beers also competed in the 2011 Reebok CrossFit Games on CrossFit Vancouver’s team. She finished third at the Canada West Regional in 2012.*