

MASTURBATION

A Touchy Subject

OBJECTIVES:

Participants will:

1. Learn basic facts and dispel common myths about masturbation.
2. Examine common attitudes and their own feelings about masturbation.
3. Understand masturbation as a healthy form of sexual expression and a possible alternative to intercourse that can be consistent with one's definition of abstinence.

RATIONALE:

Young people have lots of questions about masturbation. Websites that provide sexual information for teens, such as *teenwire.com* and *sexetc.org*, report that masturbation is one of the topics that young people ask about most often. Yet in the absence of accurate information, young people may adopt as fact the many myths that abound.

Abstinence-only education programs often compound the problem by remaining silent on masturbation, while condemning *all* sexual activity. The unspoken message is that masturbation should be avoided too. In a world of myths and misinformation, it is important for young people to develop positive attitudes about a behavior in which most will engage,¹ regardless of whether or not they choose to abstain from intercourse. This lesson helps participants examine common attitudes and beliefs about masturbation in a non-threatening, non-judgmental manner.

MATERIALS:

- Board or easel paper, including several sheets labeled **MASTURBATION**, plus markers and tape
- *Educator Resource* (Eye chart)
- A box of graham crackers and a box of corn flakes cereal
- Large index cards

¹ Research indicates that 80% of males and nearly 60% of females report masturbating by age 18. See, for example, Francoeur (1991). *Becoming a Sexual Person*, 2nd Edition. New York: MacMillan.

- **Worksheet: JUST THE FACTS!**
- **Educator Resource: ANSWER KEY: JUST THE FACTS!**

PROCEDURE:

1. Post the eye chart at the front of the room. Ask for a volunteer with good eyesight to read the chart. Have the volunteer come closer to the chart if necessary. After laughter has subsided, ask the group how many think poor eyesight is something caused by masturbation. Explain that the myth that “masturbation causes blindness” is one of many that people have heard over the years. Say that today’s lesson will focus on learning the facts about masturbation.
2. Divide participants into small groups and distribute markers and a sheet of easel paper with the **MASTURBATION** heading to each small group. Invite participants to write down as many words as they can think of that mean the same thing as masturbation. Tell them to include words young children use, words adults use, slang words, etc. Allow about five minutes. Offer each participant a piece of graham cracker to munch on while they work.
3. As groups finish, have them post their lists on the wall. Ask for a volunteer from each group to read that group’s list of words, beginning with MASTURBATION.

Discussion Questions:

- a. How did you feel about making these lists?
 - b. Why do you think there are so many words for masturbation?
 - c. How would you describe the kinds of words these are? Funny? Silly? Weird? Rude? Gross? Other?
 - d. What do these words say about how people feel about masturbation?
 - e. Which words describe male masturbation? Female masturbation? Both?
 - f. Why do you think there are so few words describing female masturbation on these lists?
4. Note that researchers have actually found many words for female masturbation. Give a few examples that are appropriate for your group, e.g., “jill off,” “romance the rose,” “a little southern comfort.” Other languages besides English have many words for masturbation, including different words for male and female masturbation. For example,

among the Japanese words for male masturbation, “senzuri” means “one thousand strokes” and among those for female masturbation, “manzuri” means “ten thousand strokes.” Ask what the difference between those two definitions suggests.

5. Now, while participants are still in their small groups, say that we need to define clearly what we are talking about when we say the word “masturbation.” Give each group a large index card and ask them to decide who will write for the group. Tell them they will have about five minutes to come up with a definition of masturbation.

6. When the groups have finished defining masturbation, ask a representative from each group to read the group’s definition. Jot phrases from each group’s definition on the board/easel paper. Add additional phrases from the sample definition below, as necessary.

Sample definition:

Masturbation involves touching, rubbing, or stroking one’s **own** body for sexual pleasure. For a male, masturbation usually involves stimulation of his penis. For a female, masturbation usually involves stimulation of her clitoris, labia, vagina or breasts.

Note: Educator should be prepared to offer a definition of **shared masturbation** (masturbation in the presence of a partner) and/or **mutual masturbation** (partners stimulate each other, sometimes guiding each other’s hands), since participants often ask about these terms.

7. Explain that throughout United States history, people have been very concerned with the supposed harms of masturbation. Hold up the boxes of graham crackers and corn flakes, and ask participants to guess what these products might have to do with masturbation. Listen to a few responses.

Tell participants that these products were invented by Reverend Sylvester **Graham** and Dr. John Harvey **Kellogg**, respected U.S. authorities of the early and mid 1800’s. They believed that masturbation caused health problems because a person’s body lost some of its fluid. The plain taste of corn flakes and graham crackers (made without sugar or cinnamon in those days) was supposed to prevent the urge to masturbate. So there’s another myth to add to the one about weak eyesight!

Discussion Questions:

- a. What other myths have you heard about masturbation? (Be sure to include things like: causes hairy palms, nosebleeds, acne, warts, headaches, tender breasts, a bent penis, nail biting, tuberculosis, epilepsy, feeble-mindedness, insanity, weakness, obsession with sex, etc.)
- b. How do you think these myths got started?

c. Why do you think people are sometimes more uncomfortable discussing masturbation than other forms of sexual expression? (Explain that while people hear a lot of myths and misinformation about masturbation, the subject is still not talked about very much.)

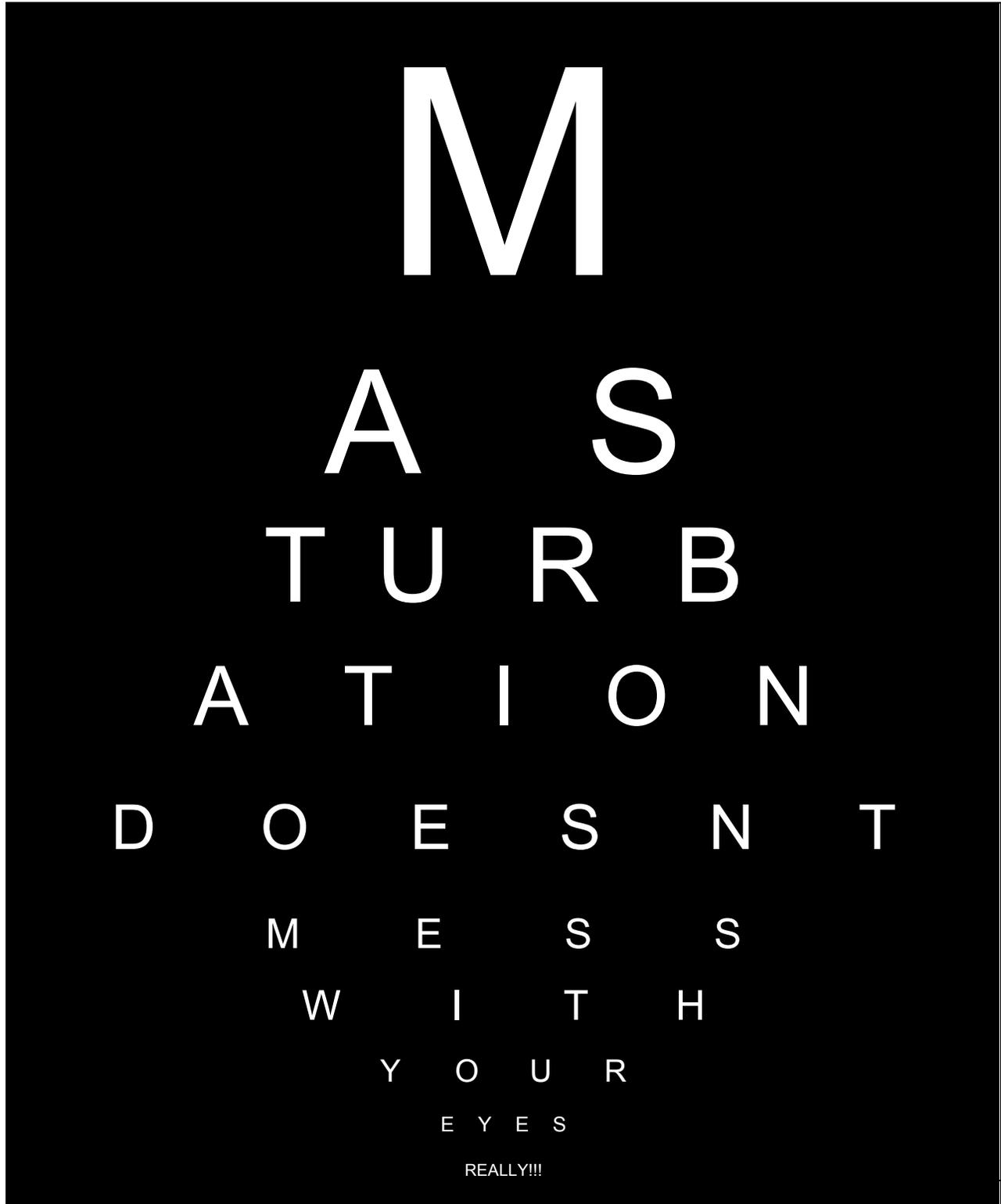
8. Distribute index cards and ask participants to write down one question a person might have about masturbation. Make sure to clarify that this is anonymous – participants should not write their names anywhere on the index cards. Tell participants they will now check out some statements that will help them learn accurate information about masturbation.

9. Distribute the **Worksheet: JUST THE FACTS!** and ask participants to complete the worksheet in pairs. After about 10 minutes, review answers with participants.

Note: A detailed **Educator's Resource** with references is provided as an answer key.

Discussion Questions:

- a. Which facts surprised you?
- b. Which facts do you think are common knowledge?
- c. What do you think about the health benefits of masturbation?
- d. How do you think masturbation might fit with a person's definition of abstinence?



Adapted with permission from Maureen Kelly, Director of Education, Planned Parenthood of the Southern Finger Lakes.

Free sample lesson plan from *Making Sense of Abstinence: Lessons for Comprehensive Sex Education*

To order, please visit SexEdStore.com.

© 2005 by The Center for Sex Education

Worksheet: *JUST THE FACTS!*

Directions: Mark each statement **T** for True or **F** for False.

1. _____ Many infants and young children discover that touching their genitals feels good.
2. _____ Many boys and girls report masturbating during puberty.
3. _____ Masturbation can help people learn about their own bodies.
4. _____ For most females, masturbation involves deep vaginal penetration.
5. _____ Masturbation always leads to orgasm.
6. _____ Masturbation can make males run out of sperm.
7. _____ Married people sometimes masturbate.
8. _____ Masturbation is a behavior that occurs in societies throughout the world.
9. _____ Some families and religions oppose masturbation.
10. _____ In the United States education about masturbation can be controversial.
11. _____ Masturbation is an example of safe sex.
12. _____ Too much masturbation can cause health problems.

ANSWER KEY: JUST THE FACTS!

(Note: See last page of Answer Key for alphabetical list of sources.)

1. Many infants and young children discover that touching their genitals feels good.

TRUE. Masturbation, or self-pleasuring (as the behavior is generally referred to in childhood), is common throughout childhood, beginning to occur from the age of six or seven months onward. Research shows that many one-year-olds have touched their own genitals for the pleasurable feelings this touch brings. Later in childhood, some children continue to masturbate, some begin to do so, and some stop and start again later. Young children may not understand the adult sexual meaning of this behavior, but they do learn from adults' reactions, which likely affect their future feelings about the behavior.

2. Many boys and girls report masturbating during puberty.

TRUE. During puberty, adolescents begin developing a strong sense of how their bodies function, including their sexual feelings and physical responses, and may begin masturbating more purposefully. In the United States, about one-third of adolescent females and about one-half of adolescent males have masturbated by age 13; three-fourths of males and 44% of females have done so by age 15; by age 18, the rates are 80% of males and almost 60% of females. On average, those who masturbate begin around age 13 (some earlier, some later, some never).

3. Masturbation can help people learn about their own bodies.

TRUE. Masturbation can help people learn how they like (and do not like) to be touched, how physical and emotional feelings are connected, and how they can reduce tension and stress. It can help people feel more confident with their bodies and less anxious during sexual interactions.

4. For most females, masturbation involves deep vaginal penetration.

FALSE. People report many different ways to masturbate. While some women prefer vaginal penetration during masturbation, female masturbation rarely resembles vaginal intercourse. Most masturbate by gently stroking the clitoris (the only body part whose sole purpose is sexual pleasure), the labia, vagina, and/or the breasts. As for males, most masturbate by stroking the shaft of the penis.

5. Masturbation always leads to orgasm.

FALSE. For people of all ages, masturbation can be a pleasurable activity whether or not it causes a person to reach the stage of arousal called orgasm with its peak in blood pressure, breathing, heart rate and rhythmic muscular contractions. A person can begin and stop masturbating whenever he or she wishes; there is no goal or end point that a person **must** reach or **always** reaches.

6. Masturbation can make males run out of sperm.

FALSE. This myth has been a cause of much worry in the past. If a male ejaculates several times close together, he may notice a slight decrease in the amount of **semen** (which is 99% of the fluid). However, there are still millions of sperm in the semen. A healthy male continues to produce millions of sperm daily from puberty throughout his life. Likewise, for females, masturbation does not affect fertility.

7. Married people sometimes masturbate.

TRUE. Many married people, people who live with their partners, and other people who have regular sexual partners, masturbate, as do people without sexual partners and/or who live alone. Among young married men and women about three-fourths (70%) reported masturbating in the past year; in another study, 85% of males and 45% of females living with a partner reported masturbating in the past year. Researchers conclude that married people are not masturbating to make up for frustrations in their relationships, but as an additional means of enjoying their sexuality.

Masturbation can play a positive role in a relationship when partners' orgasms occur at different times in a sexual experience. When couples have discussed masturbation, it can reduce the pressure one partner may feel about the need to provide satisfaction for the other partner. Masturbation can also help when one person is busy, sick, tired, pregnant, or simply not interested at a given time.

8. Masturbation is a behavior that occurs in societies throughout the world.

TRUE. Masturbation has not been studied in **every** country in the world, but it is rare to find a culture in which **no one** has **ever** masturbated. According to current studies in 32 countries **outside** the United States, the range of people who report masturbating varies a great deal. For example, 16% of young Chinese women students report masturbating compared with 87% of young women in Australia; for young men the figures are 59% in China and nearly 100% in Sweden.

By comparison, in one U.S. study among adults ages 18 to 59, about 60% of men and 40% of women report having masturbated in the preceding year; in another, 90% of males and about half of females report masturbating from time to time. Research in the

United States shows this incidence has not changed much for men in the past half century, but more women, including younger women, are reporting masturbating in recent years. However, it is important to note that most of this research relies on self-reporting. Since not everyone is comfortable being honest when reporting about masturbation, some percentages may be higher or lower in reality.

9. Some families and religions oppose masturbation.

TRUE. Masturbation is not for everyone; some people will choose not to masturbate because of the beliefs and attitudes of their family, religion, or culture, or because of their own beliefs and attitudes. In the United States and in many other countries, attitudes and beliefs about masturbation can range from taboo to enthusiastic approval; however, attitudes are generally becoming more accepting of masturbation, at least for some parts of the life cycle.

Interestingly, the written teachings from each of the traditions of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism do not hold single unanimous positions about masturbation, although religious leaders of the first four have historically discouraged the behavior. As a result, there has been, and there continues to be, much debate about masturbation in some religious groups.

10. In the United States, education about masturbation can be controversial.

TRUE. Although experts say that the topic of masturbation should be included in comprehensive sex education, in 1994 the U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. Joycelyn Elders, was fired after she said that masturbation “is something that is a part of human sexuality and... it’s a part of something that perhaps should be taught.” This firing happened even though Dr. Elders clarified that she was advocating educating **about** masturbation, not educating **how to** masturbate.

11. Masturbation is an example of safe sex.

TRUE. Masturbation has been described as “having sex with the only person whose sexual history you can trust completely.” A person cannot give or get a sexual infection or get pregnant just by masturbating.

12. Too much masturbation can cause health problems.

FALSE. Frequent masturbation does not cause health problems. Generally people stop when they feel their bodies are sexually satisfied. In fact, research indicates that there may be many health **benefits** to masturbation, such as:

- Reducing stress and tension

- Avoiding sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancy
- Relieving menstrual tension and cramps
- Making blood and hormones pump through the body faster, which helps the body produce cells better
- Helping prevent disease by increasing the flow of white blood cells and building up resistance to infections
- Strengthening muscles in the pelvic and anal area
- Helping prevent breast cancer, prostate cancer, and other prostate problems

Sources:

- Buker, J. (2002). "Masturbation". Presentation, Sociology of Human Sexuality, East Carolina Univ.; Greenville, NC.
- Calderone, M.S. & Johnson, E.W. (1981). *The Family Book About Sexuality*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Cornog, M. (2003). *The Big Book of Masturbation*. San Francisco: Down There Press.
- Francoeur, R.T. (1991). *Becoming a Sexual Person*, 2nd Ed. NY: Macmillan.
- Francoeur, R.T. , Cornog, M., Perper, T., Scherzer, N., eds. (1995). *The Complete Dictionary of Sexology*. NY: Continuum Press.
- Francoeur, R. and Noonan, R., eds. (2003) *The Continuum Complete International Encyclopedia*. NY: Continuum Press.
- Gagnon, J.H. (1985). "Attitudes and responses of parents to pre-adolescent masturbation." *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 14, 451-466.
- Hass, A. (1979). *Teenage Sexuality: A Survey of Teenage Sexual Behavior*. New York: Macmillan.
- Hite, S. (1976). *The Hite Report: A Nationwide Study of Female Sexuality*. New York: Dell.
- Hunt, M. (1974). *Sexual Behavior in the 70's*. Chicago: Playboy Press
- Katchdourian, H.A. and Lunde, D.T. (1990). *Biological Aspects of Human Sexuality*, 3rd Ed. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Kelly, G.F. (2004). (2004). *Sexuality Today: The Human Perspective*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- "The Politics of Masturbation." (1994). *The Lancet*, 344.
- Leitenberg, H., Detzer, M.J., and Srebnik, D. (1993). "Gender differences in masturbation and the relation of masturbation experience in preadolescence and/or early adolescence to sexual behavior and sexual adjustment in young adulthood." *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 22, 87-98.
- Madaras, L. and Madaras, A. (2002). *The What's Happening to My Body Book for Boys*. New York: Newmarket Press.
- Martinson, F. (1993). *The Sexual Life of Children*. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey.
- Masters, W.H., Johnson, V.E., and Kolodny, R.C. (1986). *Masters and Johnson on Sex and Human Loving*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
- Mc Cammon, S.L., Knox, D., and Schacht, C. (2004). *Choices in Sexuality*, 2nd Ed. Cincinnati, OH: Atomic Dog.
- Michael, R.T, Gagnon, J.H., Laumann, E.O. and Kolata, G. (1994). *Sex In America: A Definitive Survey*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
- National Guidelines Task Force. (1996). *Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education*, 2nd Ed. New York: SIECUS.
- Planned Parenthood Federation of America. (2002). "Masturbation – From Stigma to Sexual Health." New York, NY: Planned Parenthood Federation of America.
- Wilson, P. (1999). *Our Whole Lives: Sexuality Education for Grades 7 to 9*. Boston, MA: Unitarian Universalist Association, United Church Board for Homeland Ministries.