Timeline: Female Hysteria and the Sex Toys Used to Treat It

Vibrators, douches, and pelvic massage: Curing crazy ladies for centuries—one "hysterical paroxysm" at a time.

By Maya Dusenbery | Fri Jan. 1, 2012 3:00 AM PDT

The new film *Hysteria* (http://www.motherjones.com/media/2012/05/film-review-hysteria-maggie-gyllenhaal-hugh-dancy) tells a fictionalized account of the invention of the vibrator in Victorian-era England. But just how historically accurate is it? Surprisingly close. As historian Rachel P. Maines points out in her book "The Technology of Orgasm" (http://www.powells.com/biblio/1-0801866464-5), the symptoms of "hysteria"—a catch-all diagnosis for a slew of vexing lady problems that dates back a couple millennia—including fainting, anxiety, sleeplessness, irritability, nervousness and "a tendency to cause trouble for others." (Two other symptoms suspiciously associated with hysteria? Erotic fantasy and excessive vaginal lubrication.) And since at least the second century, a good orgasm, or rather "hysterial paroxysm," was considered a suitable treatment—at least when practiced by a medical professional. Check out our illustrated history of hysteria—and the early sex toys used to treat it—from the time of Hippocrates to today.


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Vibrating before vacuuming. At least we have some priorities straight.

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