



Sexuality after stroke

Fact sheet

Sexuality after stroke is not often discussed and can be a personal and sensitive topic. It is common to feel anxious about resuming sexual activity after stroke.

Sexuality is much more than just intercourse; it is about who you are, how you see yourself and how you express yourself.

Changes after stroke

A stroke can cause physical and emotional changes, including:

❑ Changes in the way you feel and think about yourself

Sexuality is closely linked with how you see yourself. Your body image and self esteem are important factors affecting your sexuality. After a stroke you may think or feel that you are not attractive to your partner. You may feel sad or depressed and not be interested in giving or receiving affection.

❑ Changes in the way you communicate

Sometimes the stroke will affect your ability to talk or understand what others are saying. Sharing your thoughts and concerns with a partner is important, but can be challenging if you have communication difficulties.

❑ Physical results of the stroke

Sexual problems after stroke such as reduced penile erection and reduced vaginal lubrication are commonly reported. An altered or reduced

libido and increased time to orgasm are also common. Talk to your doctor about these problems.

❑ Medications that affect your ability to have sex

Some medications, such as those that lower blood pressure or sleeping tablets, may affect your physical functioning and desire for intimacy. Increased levels of fatigue can also reduce libido.

Does sex increase the risk of another stroke?

Many people are afraid of resuming sex because they think it will increase their risk of another stroke. Research has found that there is no link between sex and a stroke. What we do know is that moderate exercise is actually beneficial for people with stroke.

Sexual intimacy often causes your heart to beat faster, your blood pressure to rise and your breathing rate to increase in a way that is similar to going up or down a flight of stairs.

What can you do?

❑ Understanding and talking about intimacy and your fears after a stroke is often the most important step. This takes effort and requires honest communication.

❑ Like other activities after stroke, returning to a satisfying sex life will take time and some changes. Allow yourself and your partner time to adjust and work through your thoughts and feelings.

- Recognise when you need help and get it. If you are uncomfortable discussing your thoughts and feelings with your partner, ask your doctor to refer you to an appropriate professional (eg. trained counsellor in this area).
 - Remember you don't have to have sexual intercourse to show love. Touching, hugging, kissing, massaging and caressing are all ways to show love and affection. Find out what you both enjoy.
 - Look after yourself. Keep yourself attractive through good grooming and personal hygiene.
 - Keep yourself as fit as possible. Regular exercise can increase your blood flow and increase your endurance.
 - Remember to use your most sensitive sexual organ – your mind! Keep your thoughts and feelings positive as you share intimacy together.
 - Plan for intimacy. Organise times when you are both rested and have no interruptions. Give yourself plenty of time. Try relaxing together before you begin. For example, have a massage, listen to music or soak in a bath.
 - Experiment with new ways of having sex if you have paralysis or loss of sensation. Ask your partner to approach your stronger side. Support weaker limbs with pillows or rolled up blankets. Ask for help from your health professional if you are unsure of different positions to make intercourse as easy and enjoyable as possible.
- Feeling depressed is common after stroke and it can impact on your relationships, in a physical and emotional way. It is important to understand that if you have depression you need to seek medical advice. See the fact sheet 'Depression and stroke' for more information.
 - If you experience vaginal dryness use a water-soluble lubricant such as K-Y Jelly. Avoid using petroleum based jelly – it doesn't dissolve in water and can cause vaginal irritation and infection.
 - Keeping your bladder empty before sexual activity is important. Try to reduce fluid intake prior to sexual activity (but increase it at other times).
 - Check with your doctor about any side effects of the medication you are taking, for example, does it reduce libido? Always talk to your doctor before you stop taking any medication and remember to discuss any herbal remedies you may wish to try before you start (or tell them what you are currently using). Some herbal remedies can interact with other medications.
 - Talk to your doctor about appropriate birth control methods as some medications, such as the pill, may interact with other medications.
- Remember a stroke doesn't mean you should stop having sex but it is important to work through how you are thinking and feeling with your partner and seek further help if needed.

Note: This fact sheet is number 2 in a series. For a complete list of fact sheets, visit www.strokefoundation.com.au



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