

Sexual Health after a Brain Injury



This pamphlet contains information for patients living with a brain injury, including:

- How sexual health may be affected after a brain injury
- How to cope with changes to sexual health following a brain injury
- Tips for being sexually active
- Additional resources on sexual health

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You can do it, we are here to help!

Sex and sexuality are important parts of being human. After experiencing a brain injury, many things can change. The way in which you experience your body may be different. Many individuals who have experienced a brain injury are concerned about their sexuality and sexual health but don't know how, who, or when to ask for information.

At Parkwood Institute, we have developed a program to provide education and support to patients regarding sexuality and sexual health.

Early in your admission, a member of your health care team will talk to you and answer any questions or concerns you may have about your sexual health. If you have a partner, they are welcome to participate in your sexual health education and ask questions.

We want you to feel comfortable discussing questions and concerns with any team member. We will help you find the answers.

You are not alone. Questions and concerns about sexuality after a brain injury are common. It is important to ask for help.

Topics people with a brain injury often wonder about:

- Sexual drive / interest
- Sexual functioning abilities
(achieving orgasm, ejaculation, erection, vaginal lubrication)
- Fertility and contraception
- Fatigue and medication effects on sexual health
- Comfortable positions for sexual activity
- Urinary and bowel incontinence
- Relationship and dating challenges
- Self-image and sexual self-esteem
- Difficulty expressing emotion
- Pain that interferes with sex
- Trouble with body movements
- Changes in how you communicate

Frequently asked questions about sexual health after a brain injury:

Is it safe to have sex?

Yes. In most cases it is safe to be sexually active after having a brain injury, however if your symptoms worsen or if you have any questions speak to your team.

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Why has my sex life changed?

Intimacy and sexual function can be affected by a brain injury. Changes to your sex life may include the following:

- **Sexual function:** You may experience changes in your ability to obtain erections and/or vaginal lubrication. There are medications as well as a variety of assistive devices that can help with erections, lubrication, stimulation and pleasure
- **Physical impairments:** A brain injury may change your ability to move, including sexual positions.
- **Communication barriers:** A brain injury can change the way you communicate, read body language, or understand what others are saying. These barriers can make it challenging to have intimate conversations with a partner, or understand when someone is giving permission to be physically touched.
- **Relationships and roles:** After a brain injury, your intimate partner may become your primary caregiver, which changes the sexual dynamic in the relationship. This role change, and reliance on your partner for care, may make it difficult for either of you to initiate sexual intimacy.
- **Fatigue:** You may feel tired after everyday activities such as walking or bathing, etc. Fatigue can also impact your sexual desire.
- **Bladder changes:** You may experience changes in bladder control or have a catheter in place. Sexual activity is still possible.

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- **Mood and personality changes:** Depression, anxiety, impulsivity, irritability, or changes in self-image may occur after a brain injury. These changes may affect your interest in sexual activity. For some people, it may be hard to know when it is appropriate to engage in sexual activity.
- **Self-confidence:** You may experience decreased self-confidence due to both the physical and emotional changes after a brain injury. These changes to your sense-of-self may make it harder to engage in sexual intimacy or explore new relationships.
- **Medications:** Certain medications may affect your sexual function by affecting: sex drive, orgasm, erection and mood. Common medications that affect sexual function are anti-depressants, anti-seizure medications, and medications that lower blood pressure.
- **Changes in thinking abilities:** Difficulty with memory, attention, planning ahead, reasoning and imagining can also affect sexual functioning. The care team may need to assess if you can cognitively understand and consent to sexual relationships.
- **Swallowing difficulty:** You may not be able to eat regular food and may need to receive your nutrition through a feeding tube. This may impact when and how you engage in sexual activity.
- **Other symptoms:** Pain, dizziness, headache, nausea and changes in heart rate or blood pressure may worsen during sexual activity, and can affect sexual functioning or comfort during sexual activity.

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How can I cope with these changes to my sex life?

Experiencing a brain injury can affect your whole life. If you or your partner are looking for information about intimacy and sexual health after a brain injury, your health care team is here to help.

- Talk to your care team if you would like education about sexual health after brain injury
- Talk to your doctor if you would like information on medications related to sexual function. For example, medications for erectile function, lubrication, sensation or pain.
- Talk to your social worker about how to reclaim your sense of self-worth and confidence to promote healthy dating and intimate relationships.
- Your care team can also help you learn new strategies, discuss your concerns and answer specific questions related to sexual health.
- Talk with your sexual partner if you have concerns about sexual activity. Your team can give some guidance on how to start and maintain communication.

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Tips on becoming sexually active after a brain injury:

- Talk about expectations and worries with your partner
- Plan sexual activity for times of the day when you have the most energy
- If you are worried about bladder or bowel control, use the bathroom before you have sex
- If you have a feeding tube, wait 30 to 60 minutes after your feed has finished before taking part in sexual activity. This lowers your risk of reflux or aspiration.
- Create a setting that is private, relaxing and comfortable
- Try to have fewer distractions in your environment
- Start slowly by doing intimate things such as kissing and hugging
- Enjoy sexual activity that focuses on pleasure instead of performance
- Avoid painful positions and use positioning aids or devices to make sexual activity more comfortable
- If you have decided on a method of birth control, it is important to have strategies in place to remember to use it

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Sexual health resources:

We have included links and resources below that you might find helpful. We can also assist you in accessing these resources on your own device.

Resource	Location and Description
Comfortable Sex Positions for Individuals with a Brain Injury	Available in resource binder on the unit Useful resource for safe positioning during sexual activity for most people recovering from brain injury. Also adapted for those with aphasia. https://www.uhn.ca/TorontoRehab/Clinics/Outpatient/Stroke/Services/Documents/Supportive_Positioning_Sexual_Activity.pdf
Ultimate Guide to Sex and Disability	Available in resource area on the unit Complete sex guide for people who live with disabilities, pain, illness or chronic conditions
PleasureAble: Sexual Device Manual for People with Disabilities	Available online and in resource binder on the unit. This resource explores a variety of sexual devices, safety, positioning, and lubricants. http://www.dhrn.ca/files/sexualhealthmanual_lowres_2010_0208.pdf

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Resource	Location and Description
Spinal Cord Injury BC	A number of helpful resources that apply to patients with disability, beyond spinal cord injury. www.scisexualhealth.ca
Spot of Delight Shop	Located in London Ontario. Accessible sex toys and devices are available online or in store. www.spotofdelight.com
Headway – The Brain Injury Association, Sexual Health and Intimacy	Emotional Effects of Brain Injury https://www.headway.org.uk/about-brain-injury/individuals/effects-of-brain-injury/emotional-effects/
Come as you are	Online store www.comeasyouare.com
Brainstreams: Sexual Health and Intimacy	Websites for patients and caregivers providing answers to common questions, online resources, and sexual health tip sheets. https://www.brainstreams.ca/learn/healing-brain/sexual-health-and-intimacy/

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Resource	Location and Description
Hope TBI: Sex After Brain Injury and Trauma	Great resource for clinicians and patients/caregivers https://hopetbi.com/endocrine-changes-due-to-trauma/sex-after-brain-injury-and-trauma/
Rippling Minds	Resources for ABI survivors and significant others. Helpful educational videos by Dr. Giles Yeates http://www.ripplingminds.com/resources-for-survivors--significant-others.html http://www.ripplingminds.com/resources-for-survivors--significant-others.html
MSKTC – Model Systems Knowledge Translation Centre	Resources for post-TBI sexuality and Sexual Functioning. https://msktc.org/tbi-topics/sexuality-after-tbi

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PROFESSIONAL RESOURCES IN LONDON ONTARIO

Resource	Location and Description
Sex Therapists	All sex therapists in London are registered with Board of Examiners in Sex Therapy and Counseling in Ontario. Search by city or individual therapist on www.bestco.info.therapistlocater.php
Urology Program at St. Joseph's Hospital	Dr. G. Brock and Dr. J. Campbell specialize in erectile dysfunction. Assessment and treatment options can be discussed. Phone: 519 646-6100 ext. 66053
Fertility Clinic at London Health Sciences Centre	Appointment for consultation by physician referral or patients can self-refer. Phone: 519 663-2966
Pelvic Floor Physiotherapists in London	Many physiotherapy (PT) clinics provide these services. The college of PTs has a list of all Pelvic Health PTs in Ontario: Public Register - CPO Portal (collegept.org) . Click on 'Advanced Search' button under 'Special Activities', select 'Assessing/Rehabilitating Pelvic Musculature' From there, narrow the search to your geographical area.

**For additional information on sexual
health, speak to any member
of your care team.**

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