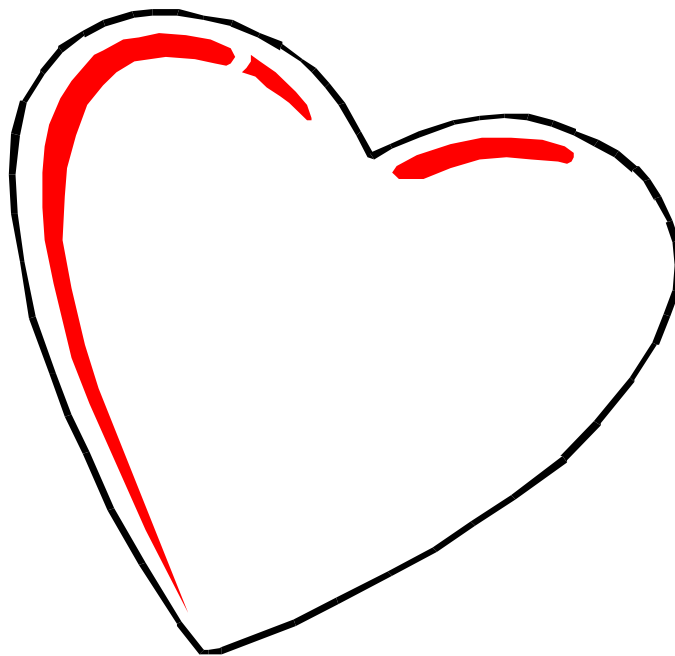


Living, loving and your heart



This booklet is for people who have heart disease and want to learn more about sexual activity.

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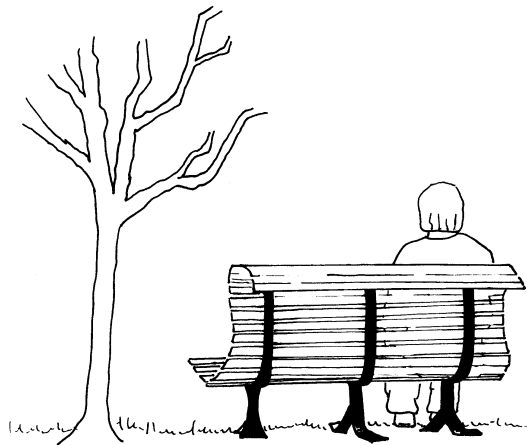
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The way you may feel

Having sex again is one of the hardest challenges facing couples after a heart attack or heart surgery.

After heart surgery or a heart attack, you may feel scared about over working your heart during sex. You may be tired or not interested in sex right now. You may be trying to deal with: “Why did this happen to me?” All of these feelings are normal.

Your partner may also be scared. Your partner may worry about creating stress or tension for you if he or she wants to have sex. Your partner may also be asking: “Why did this happen? Could I have prevented this?” Some partners become overprotective. All of this is normal.



Talking with your partner

You and your partner may find it difficult to talk openly about sex. However, you need to share your fears and concerns with each other. You may feel very alone if you keep your feelings to yourself.



Talking and working through how you feel helps to reduce stress and build your relationship. When you talk, try to relax in a comfortable environment. Listen carefully to each other and avoid blaming. Be sensitive to each other's concerns and feelings.

Remember that having a healthy sexual relationship is more than sex. Holding each other and talking about your feelings are also important. Do not feel that every hug must lead to sex.

You may need to talk with someone else if you and your partner are unable to talk openly about sex or if things are not improving. Try talking about your feelings or concerns with your doctor or health care provider.

How does sexual activity affect the heart?

Sex is a physical activity. When you are active, the heart works harder. When the heart works harder it needs more oxygen. During sex, the heart must pump harder and faster to supply your body with more oxygen.

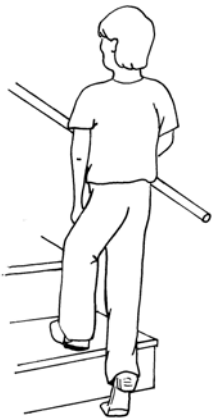
People often think that they need to be less active when they have an illness or are recovering from an illness. This is not true. Activity is good for the heart and sex is just another activity.

How does heart disease change my ability to have sex?

There are many things that affect your ability to have sex. These include your:

- medical history
- medications
- body's physical condition
- ability to relax
- attitude and mood
- alcohol and tobacco use
- anxiety

How will I know when I am able to have sex?



The general time to wait to have sex after a heart attack or heart surgery is 3 to 4 weeks. Ask your doctor or health care provider when you can start. You are usually able to have sex when you are able to climb up 2 flights of stairs without having chest pain, discomfort, trouble breathing or shortness of breath. One flight of stairs is equal to 12 steps.

Start out slowly. It may help to take the bottom position and have a more passive role during sex. For the first 6 weeks after heart surgery, avoid positions where your arms are holding your weight. This puts too much stress on the healing of your breastbone or sternum.

If you have mild discomfort or angina during sex, stop the activity. Take your nitroglycerin as prescribed.

Talk to your doctor or health care provider. You might be able to use nitroglycerin to prevent angina during sex.

It is normal for people who are recovering from a heart attack or heart surgery to have little desire for sex. This is an important time for couples to strengthen their relationship. Talk about your feelings with your partner.



What can increase the stress on my heart during sex?

Risks that can increase the stress on your heart during sex include:

- alcohol
- a large meal eaten less than 2 hours before sex
- extramarital sex
- hot and humid weather

It is normal for both partners to worry about having sex after a heart attack or heart surgery.

Getting ready and having sex

You are likely ready for sex when you feel well and are interested in sex. Start out slowly. Hugging, kissing and touching help you and your partner to get back into the mood.

Having sex with a familiar partner and assuming usual or comfortable positions are often less stressful. A warm, but not hot, shower, pleasant music and a relaxing atmosphere can help.



Do medications affect sexual activity?

Some of the medications you take can affect sex. If your interest in sex or ability to have sex has changed since your heart condition, it may be from the medications. Some of the possible side effects are:

- decreased sexual desire
- more difficult to get erections
- poor ejaculation
- impotence
- lack of orgasm
- decreased vaginal fluids

If you have any of these side effects, talk to your doctor or health care provider. Do not stop taking any of your medications before talking with your doctor or health care provider.

Can I take medication to improve erectile dysfunction?

It is not recommended that you take these types of medications while recovering from a heart attack or heart surgery for about 4 to 6 weeks. Talk to your doctor or health care provider about when you can take erectile dysfunction medications, such as Viagra® (sildenafil) or Cialis® (tadalafil).

Do not take these medications if you have taken or used nitroglycerin as it will cause your blood pressure to become so low you may faint. Very low blood pressure puts stress on your heart.

If you have any chest discomfort while having sex after taking these medications:

- STOP what you are doing
- sit or lie down
- do **NOT** take any nitroglycerin



If you still have chest pain or discomfort after resting for 5 minutes, have someone call 911 or your local emergency number for an ambulance right away.

Contact your doctor if you notice:



Call your doctor or health care provider if you notice:

- a rapid heart beat and you have trouble breathing or having shortness of breath which continues after sex
- a pounding heart beat which lasts for 15 minutes after sex
- chest pain during or after sex
- you feel over stimulated or unable to rest or sleep at night
- severe tiredness the next day after sex

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