

Living and loving after a stroke



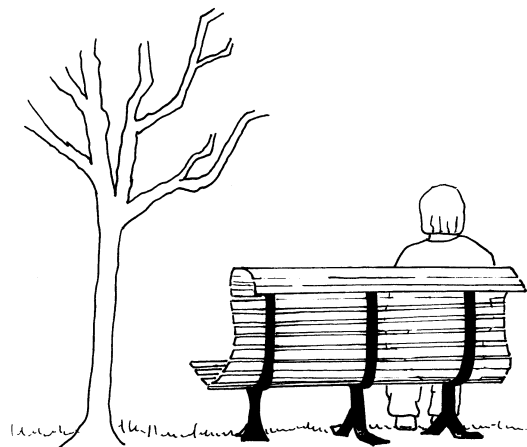
This booklet is for people who have had a stroke and their loved ones and want to learn more about sex after a stroke.

The way you may feel

Having sex again is one of the hardest challenges facing couples after a stroke.

After a stroke, you may feel scared, be tired or not interested in sex right now. Depression is also common after a stroke. 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.

Will sex cause another stroke?

Many people feel worried about sex after stroke. They wonder, "will having sex cause another stroke?" In general, sex after a stroke is safe. If you are worried, talk to your family doctor or health care provider about your concerns.

It is normal for both partners to worry about having sex after a stroke.

How does having a stroke change my ability to have sex?

Vaginal dryness or erectile dysfunction

Physical difficulties such as vaginal dryness or erectile dysfunction are common after a stroke. Women with vaginal dryness may be treated with estrogen products or over the counter lubricants. Erectile dysfunction can be treated through medical management.



Bladder or bowel control

If you are having difficulties controlling your bladder or bowel, you may be afraid you will have an accident during sex. One tip is to go to the bathroom before having sex and avoid positions that put pressure on your bladder. If you have a catheter (small, flexible tube), speak to your doctor or healthcare provider about removing it during sex and putting it back in after.



Other activities

It is important for couples to know that there are many satisfying sex activities that do not require intercourse. It may take some time to learn about different ways to experience pleasure. It is helpful to be open and willing to experiment with new sexual positions and sexual aids such as vibrators.

Setting aside some quiet and private times together to discuss each other's changing needs and desires can also be helpful.



Emotional reactions to a stroke

After a stroke, changes in roles and responsibilities may cause you or your partner to have feelings such as anxiety, anger, frustration, guilt, grief, loss and sadness. These are natural responses. However, if any of these feelings become overwhelming, talk with your doctor or health care provider.



Do medications affect sexual activity?

Some of the medications you take, such as blood pressure and anti-depressant medications can affect sex. If your interest in sex or ability to have sex has changed since your stroke, 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.

Getting ready and having sex

You are likely ready for sex when you feel well and are interested in sex.

Having sex with a familiar partner and assuming usual or comfortable positions are often less stressful. Start out slowly. Hugging, kissing and touching can help you and your partner to get back into the mood.

A warm, but not hot, shower, pleasant music and a relaxing atmosphere can help. It may help to take the bottom position and have a more passive role during sex.

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



Who can help?

Share your feelings and concerns with members of your health care team. Your doctor or social work can play a key role in providing support, understanding and encouragement.

Other supports include:

- **A speech-language pathologist** – may help you communicate better to discuss your problems.
- **An occupational therapist** – can help you with bed and other furniture locations in your home.
- **A physiotherapist** – can help you find positions that are more comfortable and less straining for you.
- **A marriage counselor** – ask your social worker or doctor for a referral to a marriage counselor in the community.
- **The Rehabilitation Resource Centre** – located on the first floor of the Regional Rehabilitation Centre.

Websites

Heart and Stroke Foundation: www.heartandstroke.ca

The Aphasia Institute: www.aphasia.ca

The Stroke Recovery Network:

www.marchofdimes.ca/dimes/national_programs/national_programs/src/

Stroke engine: www.strokeengine.ca

