Chapter # 18
Sexual Intimacy

Find out what patients want to know about sexual intimacy

You Will Learn:

1) To know when it is safe to have sex again
2) About how your medicine may impact your sexual health and function
When Is It Safe To Have Sex Again?

Since sexual activities are a key part of many people's lives, it is important to know when it is safe for you to do sexual activities again. Most people with little damage to their heart can get back to sexual activity within 2 to 3 weeks of going home from the hospital.

If you have had a heart attack, your risk of having another heart attack while having sex is very low.

Follow these tips to know if sexual activities are safe for you:
- If you can walk up two flights of stairs or walk briskly with ease, your heart should be safe during sex
- Speak to your cardiologist to confirm that sex is safe

Types of Sexual Activities
Sexual activities include all of the actions that allow people to feel pleasure in close contact (in body and mind) with each other.

e.g., Holding eye contact, embracing, caressing, touching each other, massaging, oral sex, penetration, intercourse

How Sexual Activities Affect Your Heart

Recall that if you had a heart attack, your risk of having another heart attack during sexual activities is very low. Some sexual activities are safer than others, and these activities may be a good option while your body heals.

Sexual activities that are often safer for your heart
- Caressing, touching each other, massaging, embracing, holding eye contact
- Your heart rate and blood pressure increase when you are aroused. During the sexual activities listed above, it is likely that your heart rate and blood pressure will remain at safe levels. During these activities, you can feel pleasure and share intimacy with your partner while keeping your heart safe
Sexual activities that could make your heart to work too hard

- Intercourse, penetration, oral sex
- The sexual activities listed above may involve a moderate to vigorous effort (just like exercise). These activities can increase your heart rate and blood pressure to levels that are not safe for someone with a heart problem
- If your cardiologist has confirmed that these sexual activities are safe for you, slow down your body movement and do not hold body positions where you have to support your own body weight

How Do My Medicines Affect My Sexual Health?

Your sexual health includes your sexual function and your feelings toward sexual activities and intimacy. Your cardiac medicines can affect your sexual health by changing your sexual function and the way you feel about doing sexual activities.

For example:

- Medicines you take to help with depression can lower your desire for sexual activities
- Beta blockers can affect how you perform during sexual activities

For Men

- Erectile dysfunction

What is Erectile Dysfunction?

You may have erectile dysfunction. This means your penis may not get erect. This could be your medicines or it could be low levels of testosterone (a male hormone). It is common for testosterone to be low after a heart event. These low levels make it hard to get an erection during sex.

What Can I Do?

Medicines can be prescribed for men with erectile dysfunction. These medicines increase the blood flow to your penis. **Warning:** If you take a type of medicine for erectile dysfunction and
use nitroglycerin (a drug to help your angina), your blood pressure can get so low that you could die.

Always speak to your doctor and pharmacist before you try new medicines and be sure to bring your list of all your medicines with you. **Do not use nitro if you are taking medicine for erectile dysfunction.**

**For Women**

- Vaginal Dryness

**What is Vaginal Dryness?**
You may have problems getting wet (natural lubrication) due to some of the medicines you take. This can make sex painful.

**What Can I Do?**
To treat vaginal dryness, you can buy personal lubricants at your local pharmacy.

- Longer time to orgasm

**Why Does It Take Me Longer To Have An Orgasm?**
Some medicines affect the flow of blood through your vagina. Less blood flow to your vagina means that area will be less sensitive. This means it may take longer to have an orgasm.

**What Can I Do?**
If it takes you longer to have an orgasm you (and your partner) can plan more time for foreplay. Taking the pressure off yourself (and your partner) to achieve an orgasm may make the intimacy you share less stressful and more enjoyable.
Discuss Your Concerns About Sex With Your Partner and Your Cardiac Rehab Team

If you feel that your sexual health is important to living well and you want to learn more about this, you are not alone. Many patients ask to learn more about their sexual health after a heart event.

Common Questions and Answers:

1) Question: How do I talk to my partner about sexual intimacy?

Answer: Talking to your partner about your needs, desires and fears about sex is important as you get back to sex after your heart event. Your partner will also have his/her own needs, desires and fears too. Here are some ways that will help you support each other:

Listen to and try to understand each other’s emotions

- What is your partner feeling? What are his/her fears? Let him/her know you understand. What he/she is feeling is real. You may be having the same feeling.
- Hear what your partner is saying. Listen and focus on his/her experience. Once you have understood where he/she is coming from, share your thoughts and feelings. Sharing each other’s feelings and emotions help to build intimacy. This will help improve sex and intimacy for you.

Offer support

- Let your partner know you support him/her. Support each other by:
  - Listening
  - Expressing that you hear each other
  - Normalizing each other’s emotions (“I feel the same way”)
  - Problem solving together
  - Not being judgmental of each other
  - Being open minded
  - Working together
2) **Question:** How do I deal with the fear and anxiety I feel about sexual intimacy?

**Answer:** It is normal for anyone who has had a heart event to have anxiety, fears and even depression. Many patients need a few months for this to get better. If you struggle with these feelings, you may also find that your normal interests in sexual activity have gone.

To decrease any anxiety or fear you have about getting back to sexual intimacy after your heart event:

- Talk to your cardiologist or family doctor
- Ask questions about risks, dangers and precautions to take

You may be wondering "what if I have a heart attack during intercourse?" Ask yourself: how likely are these fears? What proof do I have to support these fears? What does my doctor say about these fears?

Know that any fears or anxieties you have is your brain’s way of protecting you from danger and help you to avoid taking risks. Fears are a normal part of getting better. Recognize your fears and address them.

Ask your cardiologist or family doctor questions about risks, dangers and precautions to take when doing sexual activities. Knowing what activities are safe and not safe for you can help reduce your fear and anxiety.

Talk about your fears with your partner. You and your partner can think about ways for you to slowly return to sexual activities.

3) **Question:** When is it ok to get back to sexual intimacy?

**Answer:** Once you speak with your cardiologist and he/she says it is safe:

- Do what is comfortable for you.
- Let go of any fears or thoughts you may have at the time. Be in the moment. This helps to enjoy the closeness with your partner.
- Go slow. Getting back to your normal intimacy takes time.
It is normal for anyone who has had a heart event to have anxiety, fears and even depression. Many patients need a few months for this to get better. If you struggle with this, you may also find that your normal interests in intimacy and sex have gone.

4) Question: How can I have sex safely?

- Slow down to reduce the work the heart has to do
- Avoid holding body positions during sex where you have to support your own body weight
- Try the 'spoon position' for men and women. This is lying down with the man snuggled up behind his partner
- Have your partner on top to lower your effort

If you return to sexual activity over time, you can avoid symptoms of angina. If you do get angina, talk to your doctor.

If you are not ready for sexual activities like intercourse or penetration you can do other things for pleasure and intimacy like caressing, embracing or touching each other.

A Final Word on Intimacy

When you are ready to have sex, begin slowly. The goal is to get back to what is normal for you and your partner. You can try different things with your partner. Begin by doing things together that you enjoy.

- Massages
- Eye contact
- Holding hands

These things help to make you feel safe. Enjoy your time together. Maybe reaching orgasm is not the goal right now. Reconnect emotionally, do enjoyable activities and trust that the physical intimacy and sexual activity will come back when it feels right.