

FEEL WELL

Enjoying a healthy relationship and sexual intimacy





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Patients and Families

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Enjoying a Healthy Relationship and Sexual Intimacy

For people living with heart disease and their caregivers

Read this booklet to know:

- What a healthy relationship is
- How heart disease can affect your sexuality
- How heart medicines affect your body
- How to talk about sex with your partner
- How to restart sex safely

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Healthy Relationships

What is a healthy relationship?

Healthy relationships are an important part of good health. Relationships act as your social supports. It is important to talk to others to get support.

Social supports can include:

- Family
- Friends
- Colleagues
- Your community
- Your place of worship
- Your health care team

How you talk and feel is important for a good relationship.

Below is a list of ways you can build healthy relationships:

- Talk about your feelings openly and honestly
- View yourself as a person who has important feelings
- Use feeling words when you are talking (such as mad, sad, frustrated and scared)
- Use the word “I” when talking about your feelings such as, “I feel angry when you tell me what to eat” or “I feel sad when I cannot walk as fast as you”
- Be clear and direct about the help you want
- Do not to assume that others know how you feel or think. People cannot read your mind. Tell them what you feel and need. Telling them what you feel will allow you to get the support you want

To get the support you need, tell your family how you feel.

Sexual Intimacy and How Heart Disease Affects It

All healthy relationships need respect, sharing and trust. In a romantic relationship, intimacy and sexuality are also important. Learn how heart disease can affect sexual intimacy to help you have a healthy relationship.

Sexual intimacy is being physically affectionate with another person (using your body to show that you like someone). Sexual intimacy is important for healthy relationships. Heart disease can cause problems with your sexual intimacy.

Heart disease and a women's sexuality

How does heart disease affect a women's sexuality?

Some heart medicines can cause sexual dysfunction. Vaginal dryness is a common symptom of sexual dysfunction. Vaginal dryness means you are not able to produce the natural lubricant in your vagina. Vaginal dryness causes discomfort and pain during sex. Vaginal dryness also causes trouble with orgasms and can lower your interest in sex.

Some heart 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.

You are not alone. Many women with heart disease have vaginal dryness and difficulty reaching orgasm too. Talk to your doctor if you are concerned.

If you have vaginal dryness or difficulty reaching orgasm, there are still many ways to be intimate with your partner.

Sexual Intimacy and How Heart Disease Impacts It

Before sex you can try to:

- Check your medicines. Some heart medicines lower blood flow to your vagina. Talk to your doctor about the medicines you are taking
- Limit the amount of alcohol you drink. Drinking too much alcohol can cause dehydration (not enough water in your body). Dehydration can lead to vaginal dryness
- Talk to your doctor about depression, anxiety and stress. Depression, anxiety and stress cause changes in your interest in sex
- Talk openly with your partner about any sexual problems. Even with the most loving couples, sexual problems can cause a strain on the relationship if you don't discuss concerns in an open and loving way

During sex you can try to:

- Use lubrication. This will make sex more comfortable. Your health care team may suggest lubrication when you are not having sex too. Using lubrication often may bring you comfort
- Plan more time for foreplay if it takes you longer to orgasm. Taking the pressure off yourself (and your partner) to achieve an orgasm may make the intimacy you share less stressful and more enjoyable
- Explore parts of your body other than your vagina. Using other body regions allows you to have intimacy in other ways
- Find other ways to be intimate. Such as hugging, snuggling, touching, kissing, massaging, making eye contact, and holding hands. These other ways of intimacy allow you to be close with your partner

Heart disease and a man's sexuality

How does heart disease affect a man's sexuality?

Some heart medicines can cause sexual dysfunction. The most common problem is erectile dysfunction (also known as impotence). Erectile dysfunction is when you cannot get or keep an erection long enough to have intercourse.

Most men – with or without heart disease – will find it hard to have an erection at times. Some factors that can make it hard to have an erection include being tired, stressed, depressed, drinking too much alcohol or low levels of testosterone (a male hormone). If you find it hard to have an erection at times, it does not always mean you have erectile dysfunction.

Erectile dysfunction is stressful and hard to understand. Erectile dysfunction can cause problems with intimacy and sex. There are many ways to improve intimacy with your partner.

Here are some things you can try:

- Check your medicines. Some heart medicines cause erectile dysfunction (such as beta blockers). Talk to your doctor about the medicines you are taking
- Talk to your doctor about depression, anxiety and stress. Depression, anxiety and stress can make you lose interest in sex and make it hard to have an erection. Medicines to treat depression can also lower your interest in sex
- Limit the amount of alcohol you drink. Drinking too much alcohol can make it hard to have an erection
- Stop smoking. Smoking narrows your blood vessels and will worsen your erectile dysfunction

- Find other ways to be intimate (such as hugging, snuggling, touching, kissing, massaging, making eye contact, and holding hands). These other ways of intimacy allow you to be close with your partner
- Talk to your doctor about medicines that can be prescribed for 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. Bring a list of your medicines to your appointment.
 - **Do not use nitroglycerin ('nitro') if you are taking medicine for erectile dysfunction**

Restarting sex safely

When is it safe to have sex after a heart attack?

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. 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.

What are the safest sexual activities for my heart as it heals?

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.

What are some sexual activities that may make my heart work too hard as it heals?

Some sexual activities that make your heart work hard include:

- 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 healing from a heart attack.

Once your cardiologist confirms you are ok to have sex again:

- Try to 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
- Do what is comfortable for you

Sexual Intimacy and How Heart Disease Impacts It

- 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 interest in intimacy and sex have gone
- Slow down your body movement during sexual activity and do not hold body positions where you have to support your own body weight. Have your partner on top to lower your effort. This will help prevent angina symptoms (chest pain) during sex. If you do get angina, talk to your doctor.

Where to Learn More

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