

Spinal Cord Injury Info Sheet

An information series produced by the Spinal Cord Program at GF Strong Rehab Centre.

Sexuality and SCI

Sexuality is an essential part of all of us no matter what our age, gender, health and physical ability may be. A spinal cord injury (SCI) does not decrease a person's sexuality and rarely does it destroy his or her interest in being sexual. Sexuality includes many areas of our lives. This will try to answer some of the common concerns and questions that men and women have after an SCI.

Can I still have sex?

Yes, but it will likely be different from what it was before. An SCI can change how you express your sexuality and how you act on it. For many people, the change or lack of feeling in the penis or vaginal area is a loss. This doesn't mean you've lost the ability to be sexual and experience sexual pleasure. With time and practice you will discover new ways of giving and receiving pleasure.

Will I be sexy?

Feeling sexy has a lot to do with how you feel about yourself. Feeling good about yourself will help you to start feeling sexy again. You have gone through a lot of physical and emotional changes. It takes time to get used to these changes and to start being comfortable with who you are now.

Who can I ask about sex?

Sex is a natural part of your life and changes to sexual function are a part of your spinal cord injury. You can talk about your sexual health concerns with your nurse, doctor, social worker, psychologist or anyone on your treatment team you feel comfortable with. There is also a Sexual Health Service where nurses who are trained in sexual issues talk with clients about their specific concerns. There is also a Sexual Medicine Physician who consults to this service when needed.

What if I don't want to talk about sex?

Just say, "No." Information and the Sexual Health Service are available when you are ready to have your questions answered. You can have your family physician refer you to the Sexual Health Service even if you are not a patient at GF Strong Rehab Centre.

I'm not interested in sex anymore, should I be worried?

Many people are not interested in sex right away. This could be due to pain, fatigue, medication or feeling down. It may be helpful to talk with someone if you are worried about this.

When should I start thinking about sex again?

Some people think about sex the first day they are injured. Others may wait months or years to experiment. Everyone is different. Being and feeling sexual again can take time.

Is it normal to feel afraid of sex?

Fear is normal when things change or are different from before. People may be afraid their partner will leave them, they may be afraid of a bowel or bladder accident, or they may be afraid that no one will want them as a sexual partner. If fear is stopping you from being sexual, it might help to talk to someone about your feelings.

Will I respond the same way as before?

There are no rules about how your body may change after an SCI. Generally, if you have changes to bowel and bladder control or sensation you will probably notice changes to genital sexual response. These changes will be different for every person and depend on many things including level of injury, whether their injury is complete or incomplete and medications.

How did sex work before I was injured?

The way our bodies respond sexually is very complicated. We may feel sexually aroused from kissing, touching, thoughts, erotic movies or sexy books. When you are aroused, your muscles get tight, nipples become erect, blood pressure and heart rate increase. For men, the penis fills with blood causing an erection. For women, blood fills the vaginal area causing a warm feeling there and the vagina lubricates or gets wet to prepare for sex. These feelings of arousal can often lead to orgasm. The brain and the genitals are connected by the spinal cord to send messages back and forth about sex.

What about after my injury?

The brain and the genitals are connected by the spinal cord to send messages back and forth about sex. After a spinal cord injury, this pathway is interrupted and often messages cannot be sent like before. There is nothing wrong or changed with your genitals. It is that the message about “this feels good” can’t get from the genitals to the brain like it did before. This is why you don’t feel like you did before and your vagina or penis may not respond like it use to.

How do I tell a new partner about sex and SCI?

Discussing the topic of sex can be difficult, however, there are ways of making this task easier. Being open and honest with your partner about the changes to being sexual is important. You may need to start the discussion about sexuality with a new partner in order to raise the issue and answer some of their questions about sex. One way to do this is finding a non-sexual time to talk about some of the changes to sexuality without the pressures of being sexual. This will provide a more neutral environment and will help to make the conversation easier. You may also find it useful to practice what you want to say with a friend, a sexual health clinician, or in front of a mirror. This may help you feel more comfortable talking about sex when the time comes. If you are already in a relationship, it may be useful for you and your partner to see a sexual health clinician to discuss some of the changes to sexuality together. The sexual health clinician can provide ways to manage some of these changes as well as answer some of your specific questions.

What will help to make sex pleasurable again?

Sex will probably be different than before, but it can be as pleasurable. Your enjoyment of sex will be increased if you and your partner take some time and learn how your body has changed. This may involve talking with your partner, trying new things and planning for sex.

I don’t feel the same way as before...what does this mean for sex?

This is a time for trying new things. Take time to learn over again what feels good. You may find it helps to touch yourself, masturbate or have a partner do this for you. You can use your fingers, hands, arms, nose, lips, tongue, ears or hair to bring pleasure to yourself and your partner. Splints that you use to dress or eat with may also help with touching. Some people try warming gels for massage, body paints or a vibrator to give pleasure to each other. Others may use mirrors, movies and books to stimulate themselves and their partners. Remember your brain is your biggest sex organ and the sensation and messages in your head are very real and can give you real pleasure.

Will I need to plan for sex now?

Having sex now means that a little more planning needs to take place. This may feel awkward and uncomfortable at first, but many people tell us that it starts to become something they look forward to. If you really think about it, we plan for everything else in our lives that is important, why not sex? This planning may involve setting aside time to be with your partner and planning sex around bowel and bladder schedules.

Summary

Sexuality is an important area for many people after an SCI. It is important to note that sexuality is a unique and individual experience and talking with a Sexual Health Clinician or a member of your rehab team may help to answer some of your specific questions. Taking the time to explore and understand the changes from your spinal cord injury is an important first step. Remember a spinal cord injury may affect some aspects of how you express sexuality, but it does not mean that the sexual part of your life has to be any less pleasurable or fun.

You may also find the following info sheets useful:

- Female Sexuality and Fertility
- Male Sexuality and Fertility
- Contraception and Safer Sex

If you have any questions or concerns about sexuality and would like to speak to a Sexual Health Clinician please call Clinical Support Services at GF Strong Rehab Centre at (604) 737-6411.

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