



strokefoundation

Sex and relationships after stroke

Fact Sheet

Call StrokeLine **1800 STROKE** (787 653)

Summary

- Sometimes stroke changes sexual function but this is usually short-term.
- Stroke can affect your sexuality and your self-esteem – how you see yourself and your relationships with others.
- There are many strategies that may help improve relationships and help improve sex.
- If you have any fears or worries about sex after stroke the best thing to do is talk to your doctor or health professional to get information.

Sex and relationships after stroke are topics frequently overlooked although important to many people. This fact sheet provides some basic information and referral to resources that might help you.

How does stroke affect sex?

Stroke sometimes disrupts sexual function but this is usually temporary. Many sexual problems people experience after stroke are due to factors like relationship difficulties, disability, fears and worries, medications and other medical conditions. Sexual activities such as masturbation and partnered sex can be affected by disability caused from the stroke. Problems with mobility and hand function can change people's abilities to perform sexual activities for themselves or their

partner. Altered sensation and/or pain can also interfere.

Stroke can also affect sexuality; how people see themselves and their feminine and masculine roles. Many stroke survivors report having lower self-esteem immediately following stroke and this can impact on sexuality.

How does a stroke affect relationships?

For people in intimate relationships the most frequent concerns are about changes in relationship roles, personality and moods and communication skills. Sometimes the stroke will affect your ability to talk or understand what others are saying. Sometimes your partner may need to help with caring for you and this can change the way you see each other. For people wishing to start a new relationship any disability from the stroke will be something you and your partner learn about, accept and adapt to.

Strategies that may help improve sex

1. Start your sexual rehabilitation when you are ready:
 - Some stroke survivors say that masturbating or having sex for the first time happened early on and made them feel they were 'back to normal'.

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- For others sexual aspects of life were delayed until other important skills were regained.
- You are the best person to judge when to commence your sexual rehabilitation.

2. Get answers to your questions:

- Fear and worry can disturb the sexual response system.
- If you are concerned about something get information from your doctor or health professional.

3. Don't fear that sex can trigger another stroke:

- You may be concerned that becoming sexually aroused or reaching orgasm will trigger another stroke. This is not true and studies have not shown that sex can trigger a stroke.
- Ask your doctor or a health professional you trust to confirm this information specific to your type of stroke.

4. Investigate the cause of the sexual problem:

- Stroke is not usually a cause of sexual dysfunction.
- If you experience problems with erections, lubrication or reaching orgasm it may be due to an underlying condition such as cardiovascular disease or diabetes. Or it could be the effect of ageing.
- It's important to try and figure out the cause of the sexual dysfunction with your medical team. Some medications such as anti-depressants, anti-hypertensive's and sleeping tablets can cause sexual dysfunction.
- Your doctor may be able to make necessary adjustments if this is the cause of the problem. Do not stop taking any medication without the advice of your doctor.

5. Find an alternative contraceptive:

- A stroke does not cause infertility in men or women.
- Some hormonal contraceptives may increase the risk of stroke. Speak to your doctor for advice about contraception strategies if you wish to prevent pregnancy.

6. Manage incontinence aids:

- Incontinence aids such as catheters and pads can require both practical and mental adjustments.
- Regardless of the type of aid you are using returning to masturbation or partnered sex is possible. You or your partner may need to be proactive in finding solutions that work best for you both.
- Continence nurses have information and experience in talking about sexual concerns. [See the *Incontinence after stroke fact sheet for more information.*](#)

7. Adapt to the changes:

- It is possible to find new positions and ways of doing things that bring you and your partner pleasure.
- Start with activities you think may be easiest and progress to more challenging things as your confidence increases.
- Some people try sex toys, reading sex manuals and speaking to a sex therapist.
- Try whatever you think will help. And keep trying!
- Like every other aspect of your rehabilitation, regaining the sex life you want after your stroke will take some effort and persistence.

Strategies that may help improve relationships

1. Think about your partner's perspective:

- Your stroke has impacted your partner too so try and be understanding about what they are going through.
- Don't rush or expect things to be the same. Adjustments take time for you both.

2. Regain your roles:

- Rehabilitation and the first couple of years after stroke can be a time to regain roles that are important to the relationship.
- Despite disability there will still be ways for you to show your partner you care.
- It may not be the same as before but the effort you put in will probably still be meaningful to your partner.

3. Focus on what works:

- Try and appreciate what you are still able to do and focus on these strengths.
- Accepting some roles in the relationship have changed can also be a way to move forward.
- The more you focus on the way you are still a partner the more you will notice the good things that remain in the relationship.

4. Improve everyday interactions:

- Find ways to hug, kiss and handhold that are similar to what you did before your stroke.
- Choose positions where you can have eye-to-eye contact with your partner.
- If you are still in a hospital consider asking staff for privacy when your partner visits so you can be yourself when you are together.
- If you're using a wheelchair take opportunities to hug while standing during transitions in and out of the chair. Your physiotherapist may be able to help with this.

5. Improve your self-esteem:

- Improving self-esteem has been shown to increase sexual feelings both in individuals and their partners.
- Try and do things that make you feel good. For some people wearing nice clothes and spending more time on their physical appearance can help make them feel good.
- Consider things you are good at and what people like about you.

6. Look for professional help:

- No matter how challenging the changes you are facing, you and your partner may be able to adjust and continue your intimate relationship.
- Professional relationship counselling can help and can give you both an opportunity to talk about your feelings and the changes in the relationship caused by the stroke.

7. If present treat depression:

- Feeling depressed is common after stroke and it can impact relationships in both physical and emotional ways.
- It is important to understand that if you have depression you may need to seek medical advice. [See the Depression after stroke fact sheet for more information.](#)

8. Communicate openly:

- Be as open as you can about your needs, desires and concerns related to your relationship and sex life.
- Explain what you want from your partner and be open to your partner telling you what they want.
- Understanding between partners can bring about closeness even when other parts of the relationship have changed.
- Be prepared to raise any issues with your doctor.

9. Plan for intimacy:

- Organise times when you are both rested and have no interruptions.
- Give yourself plenty of time.
- Try relaxing together. For example, have a massage, listen to music or shower together.

For more information:

Professional relationship counsellors can be found through **Relationships Australia** or the **Australian Psychological Society**.

www.relationships.org.au

www.psychology.org.au/FindaPsychologist

Stroke support groups

You may find people who have had similar experiences to yours who are willing to share some of their story with you.

The Continence Foundation of Australia

www.continence.org.au

Phone 1800 33 00 66

Touching Base NSW

Touching Base provides advice about sex workers who have training in seeing clients with disabilities.

www.touchingbase.org

Susan's Sex Support

Includes information for people with disabilities.

www.sexsupport.org

Come As You Are

The planet's only co-operative sex store.

Their approach to sexuality is one of respect, openness, communication and responsibility.

www.comeasyouare.com

Carers' alliances

www.carers.org.au

Books:

Kaufman, M., Silverberg, C., & Odette, F. (2003).

The Ultimate Guide to Sex and Disability: for all of us who live with disabilities, chronic pain, and illness Cleis Press.

Kroll, K., & Levy Klein, E. (1992). **Enabling Romance: A guide to love, sex, and relationships for people with disabilities (and the people who care about them)**.



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For a complete list of fact sheets, visit our online library at www.strokefoundation.com.au

References

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Chan W, Ray J, Wai E, Ginsburg S, Hannah M, Corey P, et al. Risk of stroke in women exposed to low-dose oral contraceptives: a critical evaluation of the evidence. *Arch Intern Med*. 2004;164(7):741-7.

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