

Sexuality & Women with Spinal Cord Injury

Sexuality

Sexuality is the expression of one's self as a man or a woman. It is intimate which means it is private and personal. Sexuality is often expressed through both physical and emotional intimacy.

Physical intimacy is about holding hands, hugging and kissing and this can lead to sexual intercourse but intercourse does not have to be the pinnacle of intimacy. Emotional intimacy can be a connection with one's self that results in feelings of self satisfaction, confidence and self worth. It may also be a feeling of trust and sharing private thoughts and feelings with another being.

After Spinal Cord Injury (SCI)

As a woman with a SCI you may discover that sexuality is still an important part of your life. This may take time as you have so many things to deal with but as you become healthier and more comfortable with your body these natural feelings may resume. It is important that you know the facts about the impact of SCI on sexual health issues.



Sexual Function

There are few physiological changes after SCI that may prevent you from engaging in sexual activity. One important thing to remember is that SCI does not prevent your ability to fall pregnant so contraception is required.

- **Lubrication** – Many women with SCI will find that lubrication may be affected. This can be easily rectified by the use of soluble lubricants such as K-Y jelly or PDI Gel.
- **Positioning** – spasticity, contractures, areas of hypersensitivity to touch may make it necessary to try a variety of positions or activities. Talk to your partner about your needs, experiment and have fun as this will help. Always be mindful of your skin to prevent injury.

- **Orgasm** – orgasm is a very personal experience and many women without SCI either do not or don't know if they have orgasms, so it should not be the “be all and end all” of your sexual relationship. It may take longer for it to occur and may feel different; again experimentation is key to discovering what works for you. You may find other areas of your body become very sensitive during sexual activity, so listen to your body and its responses.
- **Sexual Adjustment** – Loss of movement or sensation does not mean loss of pleasure. Woman can and do have enjoyable sex lives after SCI. How you feel about yourself will impact on your desire to engage in sexual activity. A positive attitude, confidence and a sense of humour, as well as managing the day to day aspects of your SCI such as bladder and bowel function will contribute to your satisfaction in this area.
- **Communication** – is very important; your partner will need to understand the issues of SCI and you will need to convey your wants and needs clearly so you can work together to have a satisfying sexual relationship. Remember, relationships are not just about the physical; they are emotional too and take dedication, commitment and hard work.

Areas of Concern

- **Bladder Management** – your bladder management should not prevent you participating in a sexual relationship. If you SIMC; empty your bladder prior to starting. Reducing your fluids leading up to this activity, will assist in avoiding an incontinence episode. If you have a suprapubic or IDC you can tape the catheter securely to prevent it getting in the way or being accidentally pulled. You can also disconnect from the leg bag and use a spigot in the catheter for a short period of time if desired. Good peri hygiene is recommended before and after to help prevent odour or infections.
- **Bowel Management** – The best way to avoid an accident during sexual activity is to have a good regular bowel routine. Once established you will be less likely to have accidents. However if your sexual activity is a planned occasion, extra care with diet, volume of food consumed and checking the rectum is empty may assist with making you less likely to have trouble.
- **Autonomic Dysreflexia (AD)** – For those with injuries above T6, AD is a life threatening condition that you and your partner should be aware off. Please speak to your physician about this condition. If it were to occur, there will be a sudden onset of high blood pressure, flushing, headaches, blurred vision (see Fact sheet on AD for full signs and symptoms). Activity should stop immediately.
- **Ageing** – for all women ageing can impact on sexuality; there can be a decline in sexual interest and in vaginal lubrication. But just because you are getting older and have a SCI does not mean you cannot pursue sexual activity. You may need to use lubrication and you can also speak to your Doctor regarding medications you are on or may require to assist.

- **Fertility** – A spinal injury at any level will not affect a woman’s ability to get pregnant. The menstrual cycle is under hormonal control not neurological control and hormones are distributed by the blood stream.

It is well known that stress can disrupt the menstrual cycle, and sustaining a spinal cord injury is extremely stressful. Therefore there may be a temporary disruption to the normal cycle.

Many women with a SCI may miss a few months but some may not miss any cycles. Most women will have resumed regular periods within 12 months. However ovulation may still occur prior to the period resuming so conception may still be possible and precautions should be taken.

If you have not resumed your period within 4-6 months post injury you should discuss this with your physician.

Choosing contraception after SCI is much the same as before injury, so possible side effects, ease of use, smoking habits, sexual frequency and so forth should be discussed with your doctor.

Changes in sexual function will vary from woman to woman. These changes take time to adjust to as you learn about your new sexual responses. You need to explore your body and understand the changes in sensation and arousal, either by yourself or with your partner, and feel comfortable with your own sexual feelings.



Relationship Assistance

Unfortunately in some relationships there can be verbal and or physical abuse. This should not be tolerated or accepted by any woman. If you feel your relationship has these elements it is important that you speak to someone; or seek help through -

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| Life Line | 13 11 14 |
| Domestic Violence Helpline | 1800 800 098 |
| Crisis Care | 13 16 11 |

References and Resources

Spinal Nurse Advisory Service or Peer Support Advocates

PQSA 83553500 Toll Free 1800 063 419

Relationships Australia: www.relationships.com.au

Sexy Cord website: www.sexycord.com

Spinal Cord Injury Sex and Intimacy Forum: www.sexsci.me

Dept of Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation

SCI Info sheet 21: Sexuality for Women with Spinal Cord Injury.

ParaQuad NSW – LifeTime Care & Support Authority: Fact Sheet Sexuality, Sexual Function and Fertility – Women

<http://www.spinalcord.org/resource-centre>