

Sexuality, sexual function and fertility

- Men

This fact sheet is aimed at providing you with some basic information and further resources regarding sexuality, sexual function and fertility after your spinal cord injury. The effects of a spinal cord injury on sexuality, sexual function and fertility differ greatly between men and women. The information in this fact sheet focuses on sexual issues experienced by men after injury.

Sexuality, Sexual Function and Fertility for Men with a Spinal Cord Injury

While it is true that your sexual activity and function following your spinal cord injury will differ from before, it does not mean that your sexual life cannot still be exciting, playful, stimulating and satisfying.

Each man will prioritise different aspects of his recovery or rehabilitation. For some, questions about sexuality, sexual expression, sexual function and fertility are at the forefront of their minds and may be a major priority. For others, these concerns will initially take a back seat. Your particular priorities will determine what information you may find useful and most relevant to you.

Sexual Expression and Sexuality

Sexual expression and sexuality are complicated notions. They are not just about the physical aspects of participating in sexual activity. Sexual expression refers to participation in desired sexual and intimate activities as part of your daily life. Your sexuality plays a vital role in your sexual expression.

There are many different factors that influence the sexuality of a man. These can include age, religion, cultural background, masculinity, sexual orientation, values, sense of self, relationships and past experiences. Disability is just one of many factors that may have an influence on sexuality.

The way in which you view yourself sexually is unique and personal. How you identified with yourself sexually prior to your injury can influence the way you view yourself now. It may be possible that your spinal cord injury has challenged your former sexual identity. For example, if you once viewed the primary goal of sexual interaction as achieving orgasm, this may be challenged after a spinal injury if you have experienced changes to the ways you can achieve sexual pleasure and arousal. Orgasm is not the only pleasurable outcome possible from engaging in sexual activity.

Sexual Function

After a spinal cord injury, a number of changes in sexual function can occur. They may include:

- Changes in sensation in the genital area and other areas below the level of your injury
- Changes in orgasm and decreased ability to achieve orgasm
- Changes in ability to ejaculate



- Reduction in sperm quality
- Changes in the ability to achieve and sustain an erection, although this can improve over time with practice and understanding of new ways to derive pleasure from sexual interaction
- Changes in sensation above the level of your injury, although stimulation of sensitive areas above the level of injury can achieve increased sexual pleasure
- Reduction in voluntary movement, affecting positioning and movement during sex

The degrees of change will vary from man to man, as no two injuries or people are the same. These changes may take some time to adjust to as you learn about your new sexual responses. Exploring your new body and understanding these changes, either by yourself or with your partner, is a crucial step in being able to participate in satisfying sexual relationships.

There are medications available to assist with some of the changes to your sexual function, but these can be expensive and can have significant side effects. Other options such as reviewing current medication and lifestyle choices can often improve function. Talk to your doctor about some of the options that are available considering your health and lifestyle needs.

Fertility

Male fertility is often reduced after a spinal cord injury. This is primarily due to difficulty in achieving ejaculation naturally and the decreased quality of sperm. There are various treatments and methods available to achieve and sustain an erection, to aid ejaculation and to help with conceiving.

You should contact your spinal specialist team for more information regarding these options and how they may affect you personally. You can also obtain further information through one of the sexuality and fertility clinics listed in the resource section of this fact sheet.

Other considerations are raised in the “Pregnancy and Having a Baby” fact sheet in this series.

Sex and Health

Looking after your general health and wellbeing is key to maintaining any relationship. Having effective bladder and bowel routines are important in reducing the possibility of accidents during intimate moments. Concerns about the impact of bladder and bowels on sexual function often decrease with confidence and regularity in managing these daily functions.

Keeping your skin in optimal condition can contribute to your participation in sexual activities. For further

information refer to the “Your Bladder”, “Your Bowel” and “Your Skin” fact sheets in this series.

Not only is it important to consider your general health, but it is vital to care for your sexual health, too. Despite the reduction in fertility and decreased ability to ejaculate, using appropriate contraception, birth control and practising safe sex are still important elements of participating in active, healthy and safe sexual life. Men with a spinal cord injury can be at the same risk as the general population of contracting a sexually transmitted disease or infection.

Another important consideration is your prostate health. Men with a spinal cord injury may not notice signs and symptoms of an abnormal prostate as easily as the general population, so it is especially important to discuss personal risk factors and options for regular screening with your GP each year.

According to the Prostate Cancer Foundation of Australia, men from the age of 40 with a family history and men from the age of 50 with no family history should discuss prostate cancer risks and screening with their GP annually.

Reference and Further Resources

ParaQuad NSW: www.paraquad.org.au
(02) 8741 5600

ParaQuad’s Community Support and Wellbeing Service
(02) 8741 5674

Royal North Shore Spinal Cord Injury Unit – Spinal Sexuality and Fertility Clinic (02) 9926 7701

Prince of Wales Spinal Unit – Spinal Sexuality and Fertility Clinic (02) 9382 2222

Moorong Spinal Unit – Spinal Sexuality and Fertility Clinic (02) 9808 9269

Royal Rehabilitation Centre Sydney Sexuality Clinic
(02) 9808 9347

Relationship Services:

- Interrelate www.interrelate.org.au
(02) 8882 7800
- Catholic Care www.catholiccare.org
(02) 9390 5377
- Relationships Australia
www.relationships.com.au 1300 364 277

Sexy Cord website, established to support men with a SCI pursue a successful sexual and social life
www.sexycord.com

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

The Ultimate Guide to Sex and Disability by Kaufman, M, Silverberg, C and Odette, F, available through Family Planning NSW www.fpnsw.org/categories/bookshop

Sex education articles for people with a disability as well as options for online shopping www.mypleasure.com/education/sexed/disabilitylist.asp

There are sex therapy services that can provide counselling for individuals or couples around sexuality and intimacy issues. These generally charge a fee for service, so ask around and consider cost, accessibility and the counsellor's experience working with people with a disability

Touching Base: A not-for-profit organisation that aims to put people with a disability in touch with sex workers with a disability knowledge www.touchingbase.org

Impotence Australia: This includes links to GPs, nurses and counsellors in your local area, fact sheets and other useful links for men and women. www.impotenceaustralia.com.au

Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago Factsheet <http://lifecenter.ric.org/index.php?tray=content&tid=top163&cid=2560>

The Sexual Device Manual (2009) written by two occupational therapists www.dhrn.ca/files/sexualhealthmanual_lowres_2010_0208.pdf

Links to many other websites about sex and disability collected by Paul Joannides, the author of The Guide to Getting It On www.goofyfootpress.com/links/disabled/

New Mobility forum on Wheels, Relationships and Sexuality www.newmobility.com/bb/ubbthreads.php?ubb=postlist&Board=5

User's Guide for the Paralyzed Penis by Tre Trefethen http://nsrc.sfsu.edu/article/users_guide_paralyzed_penis_sex_after_spinal_cord_injury

Intimate rider: <http://www.intimaterider.com/>, stocked in Australia by Seating Dynamics www.seatingdynamics.com.au/c39/Lifestyle.aspx

www.sexsupport.org/ Susan's Sex Support includes information for people with disabilities

http://sexuality.about.com/od/sex_and_disability/a/disability.htm for information about sex and disability

www.comeasyouare.com/, a co-operative sex store, its approach to sexuality is one of respect, openness, humour, communication and responsibility that is service and community oriented; accessible and disability-positive

What About Positions and Foreplay After a Spinal Cord Injury? www.facingdisability.com/expert-topics/what-about-positions-and-foreplay-after-a-spinal-cord-injury/diane-m-rowles-ms-np

The Ultimate Guide to Sex and Disability: for all of us who live with disabilities, chronic pain, and illness (2003), by Kaufman, M, Silverberg, C, & Odette, F, Cleis Press (available through Amazon)

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

Pleasure ABLE Sexual Device Manual for Persons with Disabilities (2009), by Naphtall, K, MacHattle, E, et al

Sexuality and Spinal cord injury: Heterosexual Men 1999, Spinal Injuries Association