

Sexuality, sexual function and fertility - Women

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 for women after their injury.

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

After spinal cord injury there is a period of adjustment to new circumstances. This is especially important in relation to sexuality, sexual expression and resuming old or developing new sexual relationships. It is important to note that, despite the physical and emotional changes that occur after sustaining a spinal cord injury, you are still able to experience exciting, fulfilling and satisfying sexual relationships.

Every woman will prioritise different aspects of her recovery or rehabilitation at different times. 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 may initially take a back seat. Your particular priorities when reading this fact sheet will determine what information you may find most useful to you.

Sexual Expression and Sexuality

Sexual expression and sexuality for women is complex, and they each mean different things to different women. 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, and, when it comes to your sexuality, you are the expert.

The way you viewed your sexuality prior to your injury will have an impact on the way you view yourself after

your injury. There are so many factors that influence sexuality. Among them are age, religion, cultural background, sexual orientation, values, sense of self, relationships and past experiences, to name a few. Disability is just another of these factors.

Sexual Function

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

- Changes in sensation in the genital areas and other areas below the level of your injury
- Decreased ability to achieve vaginal lubrication
- Decreased ability to achieve orgasm, although it has been noted that ability to achieve orgasm can increase over time
- Changed sensation above the level of your injury, although stimulation of breasts and other sensitive areas above the level of injury can produce sexual pleasure
- Reduction in voluntary movement, affecting positioning and movement during sex





Changes in sexual function will vary from woman to woman. 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.

Fertility

A spinal cord injury will temporarily disrupt your menstrual cycle. Most women's menstrual cycles will return to normal in about three to six months, but this will vary from woman to woman. After this initial disruption, female fertility is mostly unaffected by spinal cord injury. Similarly to fertility, the onset of menopause is little impacted by spinal cord injury.

If planning a pregnancy, it is important you talk to your spinal specialist and involve them in the planning phase. There are some important considerations:

- Determining what medication is safe to take during pregnancy (and breastfeeding) as some medications need to be stopped slowly and over time
- Signs and symptoms to be aware of, considering your changes in sensation
- Bladder and bowel management throughout pregnancy
- Risks of autonomic dysreflexia during pregnancy and childbirth, and
- What new equipment you may need as your seating requirements change throughout your pregnancy

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 the key to maintaining any relationship. Having an effective bladder and bowel routine is important in reducing the possibility of an accident during intimate moments. Concerns about the impact of the bladder and bowels on sexual function will 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 your general health important, but it is vital to care for your sexual health, too. Women with a spinal cord injury are at the same risk as the general population of contracting a sexually transmitted disease or infection. Safe sex is still an important part of

participating in an active, healthy and safe sexual life.

Suitable options for contraception may differ for women with a spinal cord injury, especially if there is a history of blood clots or autonomic dysreflexia. You should talk to your GP or spinal specialist about the contraception method that best suits your particular health and lifestyle needs. As fertility in women is often unaffected, women should adopt appropriate birth control methods before recommencing sexual activity if they wish to avoid pregnancy.

Women with a spinal cord injury are also still at risk of being affected by cervical or breast cancer, so routine screening is still a must. The nature of your spinal cord injury may mean an absence of discomfort/physical symptoms, or you have decreased functional ability to perform breast self-examinations.

Before having routine screening, talk to the technician or physician about your specific needs (such as the need to empty your bladder before a pap test or the need for transfer equipment). If your injury is at or above the sixth thoracic level (T6), it is recommended you talk to the staff member about autonomic dysreflexia. Refer to the "Autonomic Dysreflexia" fact sheet in this series for further information.

There are a number of barriers associated with being able to access the health services that you require to be proactive about your sexual health. ParaQuad NSW has compiled a list of accessible services that can provide pap smears and mammograms to women with a spinal cord injury.

This information is available for downloading at www.paraquad.org.au or by contacting a member of the ParaQuad NSW Community Support & Wellbeing Team on (02) 8741 5674.

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 people 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, 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>

A well-researched sexual device manual written by two occupational therapists in 2009.
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 *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

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

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

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

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

Gynecologic and Reproductive Issues in Women with Spinal Cord Injury, (2001), by Burns, A & Jackson A, *Women's Issues* 12.1 pp183-199

Women with Complete Spinal Cord Injury: A Phenomenological Study of Sexuality and Relationship Experiences, (1997), by Richards, E, Tepper, M, Whipple, B & Kimisaruk, B

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), Naphtall, K, MacHattle, E, et al