Sex after stroke

A stroke can cause physical and emotional problems that impact on your sex life. Although problems with sex can be difficult to talk about, there’s almost always something that can be done about them. This factsheet looks at what can cause problems with sex after a stroke and explains where you can get help and support.

Sex can be a difficult and embarrassing subject to talk about. But you shouldn’t be afraid to ask for help if you’re having problems. It can be easy for the people in your stroke team to overlook problems with sex, but all of the doctors, nurses and therapists you work with should be able to talk about sex and relationships with you if you want to.

You may find it helpful to talk to someone who specialises in sex and relationship problems. Ask your GP about the support you can get through the NHS. Some charities also offer counselling and advice on sexual difficulties. See the Useful organisations section for details.

What can cause problems with sex after stroke?

There are a number of reasons why you may have difficulties with sex after a stroke. This includes the way your relationship has changed as well as the emotional and physical problems you may be dealing with.

Emotional changes
Stroke can change your life in many ways. It’s not unusual to feel low or depressed after a stroke and you may lose interest in sex as a result. Perhaps you feel that you’ve lost your independence or that your relationships with your friends and family are not the same as before. Your stroke may have damaged parts of your brain that control your emotions, which will also affect the way you feel.

Many people feel anxious after stroke. A common fear is that sex will cause another one. While it’s true that your blood pressure can rise when you orgasm, you’re no more likely to have a stroke during sex than you are at any other time. One rare exception to this would be if you’ve had a stroke due to bleeding from a weak point in an artery (called an aneurysm) and this has not been repaired. If you are concerned, talk to your doctor who should be able to reassure you.

In some rare cases, people find that their sexual desire increases after their stroke and they lose their inhibitions. This can cause their behaviour to change, so they may talk openly about sex to people they don’t know very well, for example. This is a difficult problem to deal with, but you don’t have to do it on your own. Talk to your doctor, who should be able to offer advice and refer you to a specialist for help.
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**Relationship problems**
Your stroke is likely to be just as life-changing for your partner as it is for you, which can **put your relationship under a lot of strain**. Your roles may change, which can take some time to get used to. If your partner is helping to care for you, the way you see each other may change, which can impact on your sex life. You may also see yourself differently after your stroke and you may not feel as attractive as you did before.

Many people have **difficulty controlling their mood and emotions** after a stroke. You may feel angry or irritable, which can put a strain on your relationship as well. You may both find it difficult to talk about how you feel, because you think you should ‘stay strong’ for the other. But if you don’t, tension and resentment can build up between you.

It may be that one of you would like to have sex, while the other has lost interest in it. This could become a source of tension if you don’t resolve it.

Sex after stroke can still be **difficult if you’re not in a relationship**. Meeting someone new is hard enough, but it can be especially tough if you have problems with getting around or speaking, for example. It’s difficult to talk about these issues when you’re first getting to know someone. Because a stroke can affect your confidence and self-esteem, you may feel unable to approach anyone.

**Physical problems**
Problems with **muscle weakness or stiffness (spasticity)** may restrict how you move and how you can position yourself during sex.

You may be less sensitive if your stroke has **affected your sensation**. You might also experience pain after stroke and this can make sex uncomfortable.

**Feeling tired** is a very common problem after stroke. Simple daily tasks can take much more out of you than they used to. This can make you feel too tired for many of the things you used to enjoy, including sex.

**Continence problems** may be a source of fear or embarrassment and you may avoid sex because of it. Catheters can also cause practical difficulties when having sex.

Sometimes a stroke can cause an **imbalance in your hormones** leading to a wide range of problems, including difficulty getting an erection in men or low sexual desire in women. This can happen when a stroke affects the parts of your brain that are important for controlling hormones.

Other **medical conditions** (such as diabetes, epilepsy or heart disease) and the **medication** you take for them can make it difficult to get an erection or reach orgasm. They can also lower your sexual desire and cause vaginal dryness in women.
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What can help?

The first step in dealing with any problem is to talk about it. This isn’t always easy and you may find it embarrassing to talk about things like a lack of desire or not being able to get an erection. However, these kinds of problems can affect anyone at any time.

Help with emotional changes

If you’re feeling low or depressed, talk to your doctor as there are a number of ways they can help. Your doctor may recommend talking therapy to you. Talking therapy gives you time and space to talk about difficult feelings with a trained therapist. Taking antidepressants may also help. Some types of antidepressants can cause problems with sex or make them worse, but there are different types available. So tell your doctor if you experience problems.

Few people feel like having sex when they are tense and anxious, so give yourself time to get in the mood beforehand. Choose a time when you and your partner are both relaxed and can be sure you won’t be interrupted. Showing affection to each other is really important. Every couple has their own way of doing it, but you could try giving your partner a hug, running a bath for them or simply giving them a compliment.

Above all, remember that sex is not a performance. You don’t have to ‘succeed’ or ‘fail’ and it doesn’t always happen perfectly every time. There are lots of ways to express your feelings and be close to another person. You could start by getting to know each other again physically, without attempting to reach orgasm. Most people get pleasure from touching, kissing and cuddling.

Help with relationship problems

Talk to your partner about the things you’re finding difficult and work out what you can both do to make things easier. Tell them how you are feeling. You may feel awkward about bringing up the subject of sex, but having an honest conversation about it is the first step to making changes. Set aside a time to talk, when you won’t be interrupted and choose a place where you both feel comfortable. Sometimes it’s easier to talk about sex away from the bedroom, so neither of you feels under pressure. Take it in turns to talk and listen carefully to each other.

Talking about your feelings is difficult, even with someone close to you, so it can often help to get professional support. Relationship counselling can give you a safe space to find a way through the difficulties you’re facing. Counselling can work in a number of different ways, depending on what works best for you and your partner, but usually a counsellor will ask you questions so that you can talk about what’s going on and how you feel. You can have sessions together, or on your own, or a combination of the two.

Sex therapy can help you focus on your physical relationship. A sex therapist can help you work out how to handle problems and find a solution that works for both of you. All the work you do with a therapist will be based on talking, but they will be able to offer you advice and suggest things that you can try at home. See the Other useful contacts section for organisations that provide relationship counselling and sex therapy.
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If you have **communication problems**, your speech and language therapist can help you and your partner find a way to communicate. It can be difficult, but try to be patient – things get better with time and you’ll find a way to say what you want to each other.

**Help with physical problems**
You can almost always do something about physical problems. If you have **weakness or muscle stiffness**, finding the right position to have sex in may be a case of trial and error. That doesn’t have to be a bad thing, however, think of it as an opportunity to have fun. You may find that lying on your side is more comfortable. If one side of your body is weaker than the other, lying on your weak side will leave your stronger arm free. Talk to your physiotherapist or occupational therapist – they will be able to give you practical advice.

If you often **feel tired**, try having sex in the morning when you may have more energy. If you suspect your **medication** is affecting your sex life, talk to your doctor about it. They may be able to change your medication, but never stop taking it without talking to your doctor first.

If you’re having **problems getting or maintaining an erection**, there are lots of things that can help. These include:

- **drugs** called phosphodiesterase-5 (PDE-5) inhibitors. They work by temporarily increasing the blood flow to your penis. The most well-known of these is Viagra.
- **a vacuum pump**. This is a clear plastic tube that you place over your penis. The tube is connected to a pump, which removes the air. This creates a vacuum around your penis, which causes blood to flow into it, making it erect.
- **MUSE**. This is a pellet that you insert into your urethra using a special applicator. It contains a drug called alprostadil that increases the blood flow in your penis.
- **injections**. You can also inject alprostadil directly into your penis to increase the blood flow and help you get an erection.
- **surgery**. There are implants that can be inserted into your penis, but this is only recommended if no other treatment options have worked.

Although you may feel embarrassed about bringing it up, it’s important that you talk to your doctor if you’re having problems getting an erection. It may be a sign that something else is wrong. Even if it isn’t, they can talk through the different options with you, because they may not all be suitable. You may not be able to use PDE-5 inhibitors, for example, if you have heart problems or if you’re taking certain medicines for high blood pressure.

**Vaginal dryness** can be a common problem for women. When you get aroused, your vagina should become naturally moist and lubricated. If this doesn’t happen, sex can be sore or painful. Artificial lubricants, like K-Y Jelly, can help with this and can be bought from most pharmacists.

If you have **continence problems**, try emptying your bladder just before sex and avoid drinking too much beforehand. A plastic covering on your bed may give you peace of mind. If you have a catheter your doctor or nurse can show you how to remove and replace it. If you’re a woman, it may help to tape your catheter forwards and to one side using surgical tape. Men can bend the catheter back along their penis and hold it in place with surgical tape or a condom.
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**Look after yourself** by eating a healthy diet and doing regular gentle exercise. This can help improve your overall health, as well as your sexual wellbeing.

**What about contraception?**

Talk to your GP about the best form of contraception for you. Women who have had an ischaemic stroke shouldn’t use oral contraceptive pills, because the hormones in them make your blood more likely to clot. Contraceptive implants, patches and intrauterine systems (IUS) also contain hormones, so you may not be able to use these either. However, there are lots of other forms of contraception. Your GP will be able to help you find the best one.

**How can I find out more?**

**Talk to us**
At the Stroke Association, our helpline team can give you information about stroke and tell you about services and support available in your local area. Call us on **0303 3033 100** (Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm) or email info@stroke.org.uk

**Get online**
We have lots of information about stroke and its effects on our website. Go to stroke.org.uk

**Read our publications**
We also produce a range of other leaflets and factsheets about stroke and related issues. You can download these for free or order a printed copy to be posted to you via our website stroke.org.uk or by calling the helpline on **0303 3033 100**.

**Other useful contacts**

If you’re looking for more information the following organisations may also be able to help. All are UK wide unless otherwise stated. Please note that details of these organisations are for information only. We are not recommending or endorsing anyone by including them in this factsheet.

**College of Sexual and Relationship Therapists (COSRT)**
**Website:** www.cosrt.org.uk
**Tel:** 020 8543 2707
Governing body for sex and relationship therapists. Has a list of private therapists and information about therapy and common problems on their website.

**Disability Now**
**Website:** www.disabilitynow.org.uk
Magazine and website for disabled people. Has a free personal ads section.

**Family Planning Association (FPA)**
**Website:** www.fpa.org.uk
**FPA Pleasure website:** www.fpapleasure.co.uk
Provides information on all aspects of sex and relationships. Their FPA Pleasure website has articles and tips, as well as a shop selling sex toys and accessories.

**LGBT Foundation**
**Website:** www.lgbt.foundation
**Tel:** 0345 330 30 30
**Email:** info@lgbt.foundation
LGBT Foundation is a national charity delivering a wide range of services to lesbian, gay and bisexual and trans (LGBT) communities. It provides counselling for individuals and couples and a helpline offering information and support.
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Outsiders
Website: www.outsiders.org.uk
Helpline: 0707 499 3527
Email: trust@outsiders.org.uk
A free club for people with disabilities. The club can be used as a dating site or simply for friendship and support. The Outsiders Trust also offers support on relationships, sexuality and dating.

Relate (England and Wales)
Website: www.relate.org.uk
Tel: 0300 100 1234

Relate Northern Ireland
Website: www.relateni.org
Tel: 028 9032 3454

Offers relationship counselling and sex therapy face-to-face, online and by phone. There’s also information on their websites.

Relationships Scotland
Website: www.relationships-scotland.org.uk
Tel: 0845 119 2020

Relationships Scotland provides relationship counselling and other family support services across all of Scotland.

The Sexual Advice Association
Website: www.sda.uk.net
Helpline: 020 7486 7262
Email: info@sexualadviceassociation.co.uk
This charity provides information about sexual problems and how to find support.

Spokz
Website: www.spokz.co.uk
Tel: 01543 899 317
Makes disability equipment including equipment to help with sex if you have weakness or paralysis.

Useful resources

*The ultimate guide to sex and disability: For all of us who live with disabilities, chronic pain, and illness* by Miriam Kaufman (2007).

A guide covering everything you need to know about creating a sex life that works for you. It covers how to build a positive sexual image of yourself, advice on sexual positions and how to talk to your partner about sex and disability.

About our information

We are committed to producing clear, accurate and unbiased information for stroke survivors and their families. To produce our publications we use information from professional bodies and other reliable sources including NICE, SIGN, Royal College of Physicians and medical journals. To request a list of sources used in this factsheet email feedback@stroke.org.uk

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