

SEX AND HEART DISEASE

Sexual activity after heart attack or heart surgery

Usually you can resume sexual activity within a few weeks after a heart attack or heart surgery. However, it is always a good idea to consult your doctor if it is safe to resume if you are in doubt.

You may feel more comfortable easing back into sexual activity by touching, holding and caressing. In the beginning, you and your partner can feel loved and secure without the demands to perform. As you get more confident, you will both feel more at ease.

Sexual activity and your heart

Several changes occur in your body during sexual activity, and you may be more aware of them now. For instance, as you get aroused, your breathing slowly increases. Your skin also gets flushed. Your heart rate and blood pressure also go up slightly. As you get more excited, sexual tension builds. Both heart rate and blood pressure rise even more. Your heart rate can go up as high as 90 to 145 beats/min. During orgasm, you release this pent-up tension and your heart rate, blood pressure and breathing return to resting levels.

How do psychological factors affect sexual activity?

Many heart patients find emotional barriers to sex stronger than any physical limitations. These feelings can include:

- Being depressed
- Being worried
- Having trouble sleeping or sleeping too much, especially during the day
- Eating more or less than usual
- Being less interested in life
- Feeling tired all the time (especially after activity)

These feelings are common. But in most cases, they go away within 3 months after a heart attack or surgery. Problems with sexual activity may increase if you remain depressed. This loss of desire is often added to a false fear that sexual activity will cause a heart problem. If you continue to have problems, you may want to seek counseling. A counselor can help with your fears and concerns as well as those of your partner.

Will medications affect sexual activity?

The following medications for heart problems can affect sexual desire and how you perform:

- Blood pressure medications
- Water pills
- Medications for anxiety
- Antidepressants
- Medications used for chest pain or irregular heartbeat.

Sex problems for a person with a penis may include the inability to achieve or maintain an erection, premature ejaculations or none at all.

A person with a vagina may not have enough vaginal fluid, which can make intercourse painful. Some people may not get sexually aroused or be able to have an orgasm. If you are experiencing any of these symptoms, talk to your doctor, as there are often things that can be done to help (e.g., lubrication, other medications).



Preparing for sexual activity

You may find that the following suggestions put you on the road to a healthy sex life as well:

- Have a healthy daily balance of diet, exercise, fun, rest and medicine.
- Exercise boosts health and confidence. Activities such as walking, swimming and dancing can decrease rapid heart rate, shortness of breath or chest pain during sexual activity.
- If you smoke, consider reducing or quitting. There are programs that can help. Talk to your family doctor about options.
- If you use alcohol or cannabis, consider reducing your intake.
- Avoid rushing into sexual activity to prove things are back to normal. If you and your partner have sex before you're ready, it may only reinforce your fears.
- Preparation suggestions: Choose a time when you are both rested and free from stress. Wait 1-3 hours after eating. Avoid alcohol. Take your usual medications prior to having sex. Use water-soluble lubricant as it may make penetration easier. Remember that there are lots of ways of expressing your affection.
- Coping as a couple. Your partner may not know when to help and when to back off. In most cases, partners are over-protective, and this can lead to conflict. Your partner may be worried about the risk of triggering cardiac symptoms during sexual activity. Also, if there were pre-existing problems with sex, these may get worse after a heart attack or surgery.
- Be patient. Try to understand your emotions. You or your partner may be nervous after a heart attack or surgery. It can take time to adjust emotionally after a cardiac event.
- Seek counselling. There are excellent clinics that specialize in sexual health.

Symptoms to be concerned about

You will likely experience normal changes during sex – flushed skin, increased heart rate. However, other changes indicate you are doing too much. These include:

- Pressure, pain or discomfort in your jaw, neck, chest, arm, or stomach
- Extreme shortness of breath
- Very rapid or irregular heartbeats

If you have any of these symptoms during sex, tell your partner, stop what you are doing, and rest. Take nitroglycerin (nitro-spray/pill) if you have a prescription. It is important that you talk to your doctor about these symptoms at your next visit, but if they do not go away with rest, CALL 9-1-1.

Final thoughts

When you and your partner understand more about the fears and desires involved in your sex life, you may begin to feel better about sex as well as other areas of your life. The truth is that heart disease may alter your life in ways you had not expected. But it also can allow you to reflect on what's important to you. In the process you may learn more about yourself and those around you.

