



The following excerpt has been taken from the Christopher & Dana Reeve Foundation Paralysis Resource Center website.

http://www.christopherreeve.org/site/c.mtKZKgMWKwG/b.4453429/k.8982/Sexual_Health.htm

http://www.paralysis.org/site/c.erJMJUOxFmH/b.1306553/k.F2A4/Sexuality_for_Women.htm

Female Sexuality and Pregnancy

Sexual Health

Sexual identity is a significant and encompassing aspect of one's personality – sexuality plays an essential role in how we feel about ourselves, how we relate to others, how others relate to us.

To be sure, paralysis often affects peoples' sexuality, including changes in physical functioning, sensation and response. Self-image can be shaken. People wonder if they can have sex again at all, whether they can attract a partner, whether the partner will stay, whether having children is possible.

While the range of sexual options may be different, physical attraction and sexual activity are realistic expectations – no matter the level or completeness of paralysis. Sexual pleasure is possible. Paralyzed women can have children; paralyzed men can be dads. Paralyzed people can have loving and lasting relationships.

The key to successfully redefining one's sexual identity is experimentation and open communication. It helps to understand the anatomy and physiology of sexual function and sexual response. It may also help to connect with appropriate resources and knowledgeable health care professionals or counselors to best come to grips with the available options.

Sexuality for Women

Research suggests that the main difference in sexual functioning between women with disabilities and nondisabled women can be accounted for by the difficulties women with disabilities experience in finding a romantic partner. Level of sexual desire is the same,

but level of activity is less because significantly fewer women with disabilities have partners.

Generally speaking, sexual expression in the paralyzed female is less affected than in the male; it is physically easier for the woman to adapt or redefine her sexual role, albeit a passive one.

Women with paraplegia or quadriplegia and of childbearing age usually regain their menstrual cycle; nearly 50 percent do not miss a single period following injury.

Pregnancy is possible, and most spinal cord injured women can have normal vaginal deliveries, although certain complications of pregnancy are possible. Among these are premature and autonomic dysreflexia (for those with injuries above T-6, characterized by high blood pressure, sweating, chills, and headache) during labor. Also, loss of sensation in the pelvic area can prevent the woman from knowing that labor has begun.

There are also some special considerations related to contraception. Oral contraceptives are linked to inflammation and clots in blood vessels and the risk of these is greater in women with spinal cord injuries. Intrauterine devices cannot be felt in the paralyzed woman, and may cause undetected complications. Use of diaphragms and spermicides can be difficult for those with impaired hand dexterity.

Vaginal lubrication can be an issue. Some SCI women report that they do have reflex lubrication and others do not. When substitutes are needed, water-soluble lubricants, e.g., Today, Astroglide, KY Jelly, are preferable. Vaseline is not recommended; it is oil based.

Orgasm is possible for a paralyzed woman if there is some residual pelvic innervation, though this is relatively rare. Some men and women are able to experience what has been referred to as "paraorgasm" or "phantom orgasm," through reassignment of sexual response to areas of the body unaffected by the injury. This is described as a pleasurable, fantasized orgasm that mentally intensifies an existing sensation.

Sources: The Center for Research on Women with Disabilities, UAB Spain
Rehabilitation Center/Medical RRTC in Secondary Complications in SCI, Paralyzed Veterans of America, National Spinal Cord Injury Association

Websites

<http://www.spinalcord.ar.gov/Fact%20Sheets%20html/femalesexuality.html>

Arkansas Spinal Cord Commission: Fact Sheet - Female Sexuality and Spinal Cord Injury

This fact sheet provides some information on issues such as intercourse, fertility and pregnancy.

<http://www.bermansexualhealth.com/>

Berman Sexual Health

Berman Sexual Health is a website for women seeking help with sexual function problems such as lack of desire, arousal, lubrication, orgasm, and pain.

<http://www.bhawd.org>

Breast Health Access for Women with Disabilities (BHAWD)

Alta Bates Summit Medical Center

Herrick Campus

Rehabilitation Services

2001 Dwight Way, 2nd Floor

Berkeley, CA 94704

Phone: 510-204-4866, 510-204-4574 (TDD)

The mission of BHAWD is to increase the access of women with disabilities to breast health information, screenings and early breast cancer detection. The organization publishes a variety of materials including the “Breast Self-Examination: A New Approach” brochure, which can be viewed on the site.

<http://www.bcm.edu/crowd/>

Center for Research on Women with Disabilities (CROWD)

1475 West Gray, Suite 165

Houston, TX 77019

Phone: 713-523-0909

The Center for Research on Women with Disabilities (CROWD) focuses on issues related to health (including reproduction and sexuality), aging, civil rights, abuse, and independent living.

<http://www.disaboom.com/parents-with-disabilities>

Disaboom: Parents with Disabilities

This page includes a series of blog posts on pregnancy with a disability written by a wheelchair user.

<http://www.disaboom.com/spinal-cord-injury-sci-information/sexuality-and-fertility-impact-on-women-with-sci>

Disaboom: Sexuality and Fertility - Impact on Women with SCI

This article by Suzy Kim, MD, discusses genital arousal dysfunction, fertility and pregnancy among women with SCI.

<http://www.mobilewomen.org>

mobileWOMEN

Email: info@mobilewomen.org

mobileWOMEN is an online magazine for women in wheelchairs. The site includes articles on Sexuality and Relationships and on Reproductive Health and Pregnancy.

<http://sci.washington.edu/info/forums/reports/sexability.asp>

Northwest Regional Spinal Cord Injury System: Sexability. Seattle, WA: University of Washington, 2009. Streaming video (62 minutes)

This video presents techniques that people with disabilities can use to enhance the enjoyment of sexual experiences.

<http://pvamag.com/pn/magazine/article.php?art=691>

<http://pvamag.com/pn/magazine/article.php?art=678>

Paraplegia News

Paraplegia News' two-part series, The New Female Sexuality, by Dr. Stanley Ducharme, a clinical psychologist in the Departments of Rehabilitation Medicine and Urology at Boston University Medical Center.

<http://www.groups.yahoo.com/group/SARFP/>

Sex and Relationship Facilitation Project for People with Disabilities

A closed Yahoo email group for people to discuss the development of sexual and relationship facilitation for people with disabilities. Aimed at raising self-esteem and body esteem and enhancing interpersonal relationships and skills.

<http://www.sexualhealth.com/disabilities-chronic-conditions/>

<http://www.sexualhealth.com/channel.php?Action=view&channel=3>

SexualHealth: Disabilities + Chronic Conditions

Phone: 855-739-4325 (Toll-free)

SexualHealth offers expert information and health care services like testing for sexually transmitted diseases. Questions can be submitted to sexual health experts through a form on the website. The page on disabilities and chronic conditions offers a few sample Q&As.

<http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Sexuality+and+spinal+cord+injury%3A+where+we+are+and+where+we+are+going.-a019755794>

Sexuality and Spinal Cord Injury: Where We Are and Where We Are Going

This article discusses the effect on spinal cord injury on male and female sexuality.

<http://www.spinalcord.uab.edu/show.asp?durki=32375&site=1021&return=19803>

Spinal Cord Injury Information Network: Women's Health and Sexual Function after a Spinal Cord Injury

This site presents an overview of research on women's health issues in the spinal cord injury population.

<http://www.spinalcord.uab.edu/show.asp?durki=97417>

Spinal Cord Injury Information Network: Secondary Conditions of Spinal Cord Injury Health Education Video Series

The 59-minute video "Sexuality & Sexual Function" explores psychological aspects of sexuality and physical aspects of sex following SCI for both men and women. The video can be streamed or downloaded.

<http://calder.med.miami.edu/pointis/sexuality.html>

University of Miami School of Medicine: Sexuality in Spinal Cord Injury

The University of Miami School of Medicine offers detail on sexual physiology and functioning, orgasm, fertility, childbirth, and more.

Pregnancy

<http://www.spinalcord.uab.edu/show.asp?durki=22442>

Spinal Cord Injury Information Network: Pregnancy for Women with SCI - InfoSheet #14

This fact sheet addresses pregnancy from planning through birth and discusses complications like bladder management and pressure sores.

<http://www.spinalcord.uab.edu/show.asp?durki=21598&site=1021&return=21874>

Spinal Cord Injury Information Network: Pregnancy

This page lists pregnancy and parenting resources for women with disabilities.

http://www.bcm.edu/crowd/national_study/PREGNANC.htm

The National Study of Women with Physical Disabilities: Pregnancy

<http://cirrie.buffalo.edu/encyclopedia/en/article/260/>

Pregnancy Planning for Women with Mobility Disabilities

This article by Judi Rogers, OTR/L, addresses pregnancy from planning through birth.

Other Videos

<http://sci.washington.edu/info/forums/reports/sexability.asp>

Northwest Regional Spinal Cord Injury System: Sexability. Seattle, WA: University of Washington, 2009. Streaming video (62 minutes)

This video presents techniques that people with disabilities can use to enhance the enjoyment of sexual experiences.

<http://www.spinalcord.uab.edu/show.asp?durki=97417>

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The following books and videos are available for free loan from the PRC library. For more information, please see www.paralysis.org and click *Borrow from Our Lending Library* under PRC Quick Links.

Books

- Blackburn, Maddie. **Sexuality & Disability**. Oxford, UK: Butterworth Heinemann, 2002.
This book is specific to those with spina bifida and hydrocephalus.
- **Disability in Pregnancy and Childbirth**. Edinburgh: Churchill Livingstone Elsevier, 2007.
- Karp, Gary. **Disability & The Art of Kissing: Questions and Answers on the True Nature of Disability**. Life on Wheels Press, 2006. 2nd edition.
- Kuttai, Heather. **Maternity Rolls: Pregnancy, Childbirth and Disability**. Halifax, Canada: Fernwood Publishing, 2010.
- Rogers, Judith. **The Disabled Woman's Guide to Pregnancy and Birth**. New York, NY: Demos Medical Publishing, 2006.
- **Sexuality and Reproductive Health in Adults with Spinal Cord Injury: A Clinical Practice Guideline for Health Care Professionals**. Washington, DC: Paralyzed Veterans of America, 2010. www.pva.org
Written for health care professionals, it can be viewed online for free.
- **Sexuality and Reproductive Health in Adults with Spinal Cord Injury: What You Should Know**. Washington, DC: Paralyzed Veterans of America, 2011. www.pva.org
Written for consumers, it can be viewed online for free.

Videos

- **Disability and Motherhood**. Princeton, NJ: Films for the Humanities & Sciences, 1995. (25 minutes)
- **Doin' It: Sex, Disability and Videotape**. Chicago, IL: Beyondmedia Education. DVD. (35 minutes)
- **Molly and Jeramy: Relationships, Sexuality and Spinal Cord Injury**. Sherborn, MA: Aquarius Healthcare Videos, 2004. DVD and VHS. (25 minutes)
- **Reproductive Health for Women With Spinal Cord Injury Part 1 – The Gynecological Examination**. Birmingham, AL: RRRTC on Secondary Conditions of SCI, 1997. (30 minutes)
- **Reproductive Health for Women With Spinal Cord Injury Part 2 – Pregnancy & Delivery**. Birmingham, AL: RRRTC on Secondary Conditions of SCI, 1997. (32 minutes)

- **Sexuality Reborn.** West Orange, NJ: Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation, 1993. (48 minutes)
- **Toward Intimacy: Women With Disabilities.** New York, NY: Filmmakers Library, 1992. (60 minutes)
- **Untold Desires.** New York: Filmmakers Library, 1995.
Both men and women with disabilities discuss their quest to be recognized as sexual beings and their right to become parents.
- **Women's Sexuality After SCI.** Miami, FL: University of Miami School of Medicine, 2003. (18 minutes)

The information contained in this message is presented for the purpose of educating and informing you about paralysis and its effects. Nothing contained in this message should be construed nor is intended to be used for medical diagnosis or treatment. It should not be used in place of the advice of your physician or other qualified health care provider. Should you have any health care related questions, please call or see your physician or other qualified health care provider promptly. Always consult with your physician or other qualified health care provider before embarking on a new treatment, diet or fitness program. You should never disregard medical advice or delay in seeking it because of something you have read in this message.