



Sexuality and Fertility for Women



Understanding sexual function and reproductive health is an important factor for improving overall well-being and quality of life after paralysis. While the range of sexual options may be different, sexual satisfaction is possible no matter the level or completeness of your injury. To better understand your options and clear up misconceptions, it is best to address the sometimes challenging physical, emotional, and psychological issues around the topic.

Q: How does SCI affect sexual function for women?

Like the challenges to other bodily functions at or below the level of the injury, a spinal cord injury may decrease natural lubrication and affect your ability to experience a physical orgasm. Both require a high degree of coordination and interaction between nerves, the vagina, and the brain. There may also be a direct and indirect impact from the emotional and psychological adjustments associated with sexuality. A holistic approach should be taken that includes the range of factors that influence one's sexual life and satisfaction.

Q: Can I get pregnant after SCI?

Although women may experience a pause in menstruation following a spinal cord injury, pregnancy is always a possibility as the result of sex. Birth control should be used if you do not desire to get pregnant. Some options, like intrauterine devices and spermicides, may be more difficult to manage, and women should be aware of the birth control pill's increased risk of deep vein thrombosis, a potentially life-threatening blood clot. Pregnancy and childbirth may also increase your risk for autonomic dysreflexia (AD). Please discuss the options and risks with your doctor. Individuals with paralysis can contract sexually transmitted diseases so condoms are the best choice for safe sex.

Q: How does upper motor neuron impact sexual function versus lower motor neuron?

While each person's function is unique, most experience changes depending on the level and severity of the injury. Orgasm is a distinct neurological event that is controlled at the S3-5 level. If messages from the brain are unable to reach this spinal cord segment, vaginal response may be limited. There are two pathways for sexual arousal that rely on discrete areas of the spinal cord. A psychogenic (mental) arousal, driven by sexual thoughts or visualizations, is typically lost after complete upper motor neuron (T11 and above) injuries. On the other hand, reflexogenic arousal, which results from direct physical contact, is often preserved in injuries above T10. It is important to remember that other arousal sensations above the level of the injury are unaffected.

A return to sexual activity is often a top priority for individuals living with paralysis. Here are some tips:

- Adjust your expectations to include new ways to achieve sexual pleasure
- Explore how all available senses — sight, smell, taste, hearing, as well as touch — can be incorporated into sexual interactions
- Go slow and stay focused, trust in yourself and the possibilities
- Talk to your partner and healthcare team about your abilities and concerns

Q: What type of sexual aides help with sexual activities?

Sexual pleasure is individual so be open to exploring different options as sexual aides. While emotional intimacy and mental arousal can enhance sexual satisfaction, you can talk with your doctor about other interventions that may be possible. Nonmedical approaches to try including self-exploration and foreplay, and devices, such as stimulators and vibrators. Water-based lubricants may facilitate intercourse when natural lubrication is lacking. Oil-based lubricants such as petroleum jelly are not recommended as they increase the risk of infection and are messy and hard to remove. Sildenafil, the active ingredient in Viagra, may be prescribed for women on a “let’s see if it works” basis.

Q: How do I manage autonomic dysreflexia (AD) with sex?

For individuals with spinal cord injuries at the level of T6 or above, sexual activity, especially orgasm, can trigger autonomic dysreflexia (AD). While emerging scientific research suggests that mild to moderate signs of AD are not necessarily medically dangerous, it is important to remain watchful for flushing in the face, headaches, nasal congestion, changes in vision and other signs of AD. Before having sex for the first time after injury, be sure to talk to your healthcare team about the risks, management and treatment of AD. Stop activity immediately and sit up for treatment at AD onset during sexual activity. Consult with your physician about the increased risk for AD during pregnancy, labor, delivery and if you are taking erectile dysfunction (ED) drugs. Open communication with your partner on AD beforehand is advised.

Need to talk to someone?

Our Information Specialists are available to answer your questions.

Call toll-free 1-800-539-7309 Mon-Fri, 7 am-8 pm EST.

Or schedule a call or ask a question online at

<https://www.ChristopherReeve.org/Ask>.

Resources for Sexuality

American Stroke Association: Intimacy After Stroke

<https://www.stroke.org/en/about-stroke/effects-of-stroke/emotional-effects/intimacy-after-stroke>

American Stroke Association: Sex After Stroke: New Study Highlights Survivors' Fears

<https://www.heart.org/en/news/2021/03/15/sex-after-stroke-new-study-highlights-survivors-fears>

Baylor College of Medicine: The National Study of Women with Physical Disabilities

<https://www.bcm.edu/research/research-centers/center-for-research-on-women-with-disabilities/a-to-z-directory/national-study-of-women-with-physical-disabilities>

This report includes sections on sex, sexual functioning, pregnancy STDs, and

gynecological health for women with disabilities.

Berman Sexual Health

<https://bermansexualhealth.com/>

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

Center for Research on Women with Disabilities (CROWD)

<https://www.bcm.edu/research/research-centers/center-for-research-on-women-with-disabilities>

One Baylor Plaza

Houston, TX 77030

Phone: 832-819-0232

Toll-free: 800-44-CROWD

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.

Christopher & Dana Reeve Foundation: Sexual and Reproductive Health After Paralysis Booklet

<http://s3.amazonaws.com/reeve-assets-production/Sexual-Health-Booklet-4-19.pdf>

If you would like a free printed copy, please call the Reeve Foundation at 800-539-7309.

Craig Hospital: Sexual Health Resources

<https://craighospital.org/resources/sexual-function-for-men-after-spinal-cord-injury>

Disability Health Research Network: PleasurABLE Sexual Device Manual for People with Disabilities

http://www.dhrn.ca/files/sexualhealthmanual_lowres_2010_0208.pdf

A 2009 manual for people with disabilities.

Mount Sinai Hospital: Sexuality After SCI

<https://www.sexualitysci.org/>

SCI Ontario: Top 10 Adaptive Sex Techniques

<https://sciontario.org/voices-blog/top-10-adaptive-sex-techniques/>

“Sex Toy Roundup.” By Mitch Tepper. *New Mobility* Feb. 2018 p. 35.

<https://newmobility.com/adaptive-sex-toys/>

“Sexuality After Spinal Cord Injury: Creating A Lasting, Transformative Resource”. By Ian Ruder Feb. 2019

<http://newmobility.com/sexuality-after-spinal-cord-injury/>

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

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

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

Spinal Cord Injury Information Network: Sexuality & Sexual Function

<https://www.uab.edu/medicine/sci/daily-living/sexuality-a-sexual-function>

This site presents an overview of information on sexuality & sexual health in the spinal cord injury population.

Take Charge! A Reproductive Health Guide for Women with Disabilities

<https://www.accessliving.org/get-involved/>

The guide is available as a free download.

Resources for Pregnancy

Baylor College of Medicine: The National Study of Women with Physical Disabilities—Reproductive Health

<https://www.bcm.edu/research/research-centers/center-for-research-on-women-with-disabilities/a-to-z-directory/reproductive-health>

Model Systems Knowledge Translation Center: Pregnancy and Women with SCI

https://msktc.org/lib/docs/Factsheets/SCI_and_Pregnancy_.pdf

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

Model Systems Knowledge Translation Center: Sexuality and Sexual Functioning After Spinal Cord Injury

https://msktc.org/lib/docs/Factsheets/SCI_Sexuality.pdf

NACCHO: Pregnancy and Motherhood in Women with Disabilities—Information and Opportunities for Local Health Departments

<https://www.naccho.org/blog/articles/pregnancy-and-motherhood-in-women-with-disabilities-information-and-opportunities-for-local-health-departments>

Videos

Northwest Regional Spinal Cord Injury System: Sexability

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

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.

Northwest Regional Spinal Cord Injury System: Conversations from the Bedroom: Sex after Spinal Cord Injury. 2011 Streaming video (74 minutes)

https://sci.washington.edu/info/forums/reports/sex_sci_2011.asp

In this forum, real people with spinal cord injuries talk about their real sexual experiences since injury. Two men with quadriplegia and one woman with paraplegia discuss the good, the bad, and the funny. A rehab physician answers questions related

to medical issues and sexual activity

Shepherd Center: Empowering Women with Spinal Cord Injury

<https://www.shepherd.org/why-shepherd/resources-patients/women-sci-resource-videos>

Series includes videos on:

- Pregnancy, Labor and Delivery
- Intimacy
- Dating
- Sex Positions
- Parenting

Vimeo: Dr. Mitchell Tepper's videos

<https://vimeo.com/drmitchelltepper/videos>

Two streaming videos--one is entitled “Sexual Positions for Men with Spinal Cord Injury” and the other is entitled “Sexual Positions for Women with Paralysis”. Dr. Tepper is an expert in the field of sex and disability.

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