

# SEXUALITY, INTIMACY AND KIDNEY DISEASE



## HOW DOES CHRONIC KIDNEY DISEASE AFFECT SEXUALITY AND INTIMACY?

Dealing with the health problems caused by kidney failure can be difficult. It is easy to get caught up in the medical side and forget the enormous impact it also has on your personal life. One of the areas that is often overlooked is sexuality. This is a very personal topic and some people may not feel like talking about it.

Chronic kidney disease, as well as other health issues such as diabetes and high blood pressure affect your sex life. Other medical issues, medicines and psychological factors can also have an impact. If you have a good relationship with your partner, it will probably be easier to work through these issues. However if you and your partner were having intimacy problems before you developed kidney failure, there is a chance that the effects of your condition may cause them to become more serious.

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## WHAT IS SEXUALITY?

Sexuality is more than just sex. It is an important part of who you are, how you see yourself, how you express yourself, your sense of self-worth and your sexual feelings for others. Sexuality differs from person to person and is influenced by many factors, including religion, culture, age and individual situations.

Sexuality is expressed in many ways - the clothes you wear, the way you move, the way you have sex and who you have sex with. It also affects how you feel about your body and how you look (body image).

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## HOW DO PHYSICAL CHANGES AFFECT YOUR SEXUALITY?

Kidney failure brings many physical changes that can affect how you feel about your body and your sexuality. Some of these physical changes can be;

- Body odour
- Bruising
- Decreased endurance and energy levels.
- Extra fluid from fluid retention or carrying peritoneal dialysis fluid
- Hair loss or gain
- Bad breath or a 'coated' tongue
- Reduced ability or inability to reach orgasm
- Skin changes such as itchiness, dryness or colour

- Strength and control
- Weight changes

Don't be afraid to talk to your doctor about these changes as some of these changes can be treated or managed in a way that can make you feel better about your body.

See *Make the most of your visit to your doctor* fact sheet for more information.

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## **HOW DOES KIDNEY FAILURE AFFECT SEXUAL INTIMACY?**

You may be faced with tiredness, decreased sexual desire, reduced ability to orgasm, changing body features and be on constant medication. This can often mean that sex, or even the idea of sex, is the last thing on your mind. However most people, particularly if you have previously enjoyed a good sex-life, at some stage like to restart sexual intercourse.

The physical side-effects of kidney failure may impact on your ability to perform sexually. It is important that partners are aware of these side effects and understand they are not anyone's fault. You may experience, one or more, or perhaps none, of these side effects.

- Ability to orgasm - Less energy, hormone changes, hardening of the arteries in the pelvis and blood pressure medication all make it harder to climax. This may be solved with a change in blood pressure medication, extra hormones or more foreplay.
- Arousal - The build up of waste in the blood, tiredness, loss of sexual desire and emotional state may also affect your sexual arousal and it may take longer to be 'turned on'. Partners may need to explore foreplay, spending more time pleasuring each other, with or without intercourse.
- Dry vagina - Lower hormone levels and the effect of some medications for women may lead to a dry vagina, which can cause pain during intercourse. Uncomfortable or painful intercourse can affect the desire to have sex. A water-soluble vaginal lubricant can be helpful. Oil-based jelly is not usually advised as it increases the risk of infection and may damage some contraceptive devices such as condoms.
- Emotions - If you are depressed, anxious or worried about your health, you will probably be less concerned or interested in sex. You may find that once you have adjusted to dialysis that your health improves and your sex drive increases. Despite feeling better, some people still experience sexual problems caused by emotional factors.
- After a transplant - Feelings that may add to sexual problems can include fear of sexual failure or anxiety about damaging catheters and fistulas. Some people worry about changes to their appearance. A change in body image may not affect your ability to have sex but it may make you feel less sexual.

## **DOES CKD CAUSE IMPOTENCE?**

Men often report some degree of impotence – even those without kidney failure. Impotence, also called erectile dysfunction, is when a man's penis does not become hard, reducing his ability to have or maintain an erection to the point where he is unable to have sexual activity with penetration.

The physical and emotional effects of kidney failure can affect getting and maintaining an erection. These include:

- Changes in hormone levels
- Build up of waste and fluid in the blood
- Problems with blood circulation
- Nerve damage
- Anaemia
- Low vitamin and trace metal levels, e.g. zinc
- Reduced strength and energy levels
- Medication, particularly blood pressure tablets
- Low self esteem
- Body image problems
- Depression, anxiety and stress
- Fear of being unable to perform sexually

Worrying about it often makes it worse. For many men who have or have had problems with impotence, the fear and negative thoughts about being unable to get or keep an erection can create erection anxiety.

As with all medical problems, the best treatment really depends on the cause of the problem and personal preferences.

It is important that you talk to someone who knows your health history and understands the medications that you are taking. Treatment for erectile dysfunction is available in a number of forms. Most people start off with tablets. Medications have been shown to be safe for people with kidney failure, though people with some heart conditions and on certain medications should not take them. It is best to talk to your doctor about these medications and other ways of managing impotence.

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## **HOW DO I TALK ABOUT SEX WITH MY PARTNER?**

It is important to remember that most couples experience some problems with sex and intimacy. No couple has a perfect sexual experience every time. It is just a matter of working out what is best for you and your partner. Communication is important for a successful, sexual relationship.

You need to talk to your partner about what is happening to you sexually, physically and emotionally. Sex is something that you and your partner share

together so it is important that you find answers together. Talking about sex can be difficult. Following are some hints to make it easier:

- Think through what you want to say before you say it.
- Choose a time when you are both relaxed and can concentrate. Make sure you do not discuss it during an argument or after a frustrating day.
- Choose a place where you and your partner feel comfortable. Sex is a personal subject and your partner may not feel comfortable discussing it in a public place.
- Make sure that your conversation does not begin with excuses or blaming.
- Allow your partner to share feelings and really listen to what they are saying. Remember that your partner is not a mind reader; avoid upsetting each other with second guesses as to what you like and how you are feeling.

For those couples having difficulties discussing sex and intimacy, there are many organisations that have counsellors that specialise in sexuality and relationships. Talking to a counsellor may help you and your partner to learn how to communicate about sex and intimacy and explore ways of satisfying each other. You may want to talk to your doctor or another health professional about getting a referral to a counsellor that specialises in these issues.

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## **WHAT CAN I DO TO MAINTAIN MY RELATIONSHIP?**

All relationships require time, effort and understanding to make them work. This can become much harder if you have a chronic condition. Not only are you dealing with the usual relationship ups and downs but also the added stress of chronic illness.

Sex and intimacy are more than just intercourse. There are many other ways to express intimacy and satisfy both yourself and your partner. Through simple gestures and touching you can still express the feelings of desire, closeness, love and affection that you have for each other. Here are some other suggestions:

- Make time for one another
- Attend appointments together
- Stay informed
- Give your partner time out from treatment
- Get professional help
- Maintain your own interests

There is no secret to maintaining a happy relationship when one partner has kidney failure. The best you can do is be honest with one another and supportive of each other's needs. While this is not always easy, having respect and trust means you are more likely to ride out the tough times as well as enjoy the good. Everyone's experiences are different. Remember there is no right way to feel when you are dealing with change. Accepting and talking about these feelings is one of the best ways of dealing with them and beginning to move on.

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## **HOW DO I BALANCE A NEW RELATIONSHIP AND A CHRONIC DISEASE?**

Meeting a potential new partner can be an exciting but sometimes nervous experience. It is hard for everyone but having a chronic condition can make it even harder. Concerns about yourself may surface and make you feel less desirable. You may be dealing with lifestyle changes e.g. dietary restrictions or dialysis demands, anxiety due to sexual problems, body changes such as fistulas or catheters and weight changes. Be aware, however, that we are often more critical of ourselves than others around us.

Before entering a new relationship you may want to consider whether you have the energy and time to give to a new partner, particularly if you are not feeling well. If you are wanting to meet someone new, you may need to think about how to explain chronic kidney disease, its effect on you and how it is likely to affect a new partner.

Telling a partner or potential partner about sexual or fertility problems can be very difficult as this is a highly sensitive and personal area. It is important that you are up-front with your potential partner, as they will find out anyway. If the person really cares about you, then it may not matter to them that you are experiencing troubles with your sexuality.

**The seventh edition of *Living with Kidney Failure* has a comprehensive chapter on this topic. Please contact Kidney Health Australia for more information.**

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**For more information about kidney health or this topic, please contact Kidney Health Australia: Kidney Information Line (freecall) on 1800 682 531 or visit website [www.kidney.org.au](http://www.kidney.org.au)**

This is intended as a general introduction to this topic and is not meant to substitute for your doctor's or Health Professional's advice. All care is taken to ensure that the information is relevant to the reader and applicable to each state in Australia. It should be noted that Kidney Health Australia recognises that each person's experience is individual and that variations do occur in treatment and management due to personal circumstances, the health professional and the state one lives in. Should you require further information always consult your doctor or health professional.

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