

Sexual Function Following Spinal Cord Injury



Introduction

- Spinal cord injury can have significant effects upon the normal sexual function of an individual.
- You are the same person as before your injury and just as capable of being in a loving and satisfactory relationship.
- Spinal cord injury impairs the passage of messages from the brain to the nerves resulting in a change to sexual function.

Initially you may feel that sex is the last thing on your mind. Being apart from your family and partner is not easy and lack of privacy makes it difficult to think about intimacy. Your body will have gone through many changes and part of the rehabilitation process is about regaining control of the body you may feel doesn't belong to you anymore. This is a normal response and you need time for the initial psychological and physical trauma to subside.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1waqXYrRQI>



How Sexual Function Changes

You may not have the same sensation and mobility

For men:

- They may have erectile dysfunction and be unable to achieve or sustain an erection due to signals not getting transmitted effectively from the brain beyond the point of injury.
- Their ability to ejaculate and orgasm may be affected.

For women:

- Most women who have not been through the menopause may find their periods stop short term, but resume.
- Women may experience changes to their physiology such as the vagina may not lubricate properly.
- However, fertility is not affected.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdp_1ddpril



Sexual Intercourse Following a Spinal Cord Injury

Is sex possible following a spinal cord injury? The answer in many cases is yes, for both men and women.

With most individuals who have an SCI, it takes a little time to become comfortable with the limitations of their body and begin to explore again. Practical solutions like making sure the bladder is empty before sexual contact and having lubricant available are helpful but it often comes down to being prepared to explore the options.

It is often like learning to have sex with a partner all over again:

- Take time to explore the body and see which sensations are still intact.
- Most experts suggest moving slowly and staying focused. Touching different areas of the body can produce different responses within a very small area depending on the type of spinal cord injury.
- It's also important to communicate with a partner, especially if certain parts of the body are painful or irritating.
- Explore all regions of the body, not just the area normally associated with sexual intercourse.



What If I Am Incontinent?

- Ensure your bladder and bowel are empty before being intimate with your partner.
- This will reduce the risk of having an accident.
- It will also reduce the risk of autonomic dysreflexia.



Erectile Dysfunction Treatment

- **Vacuum Device therapy** – This is a non invasive method of initiating an erection. A cylinder is placed over the penis and a pump is used to create a vacuum within the cylinder. The erection is maintained using a constriction ring around the base of the penis. This ring must be removed within 30 minutes to prevent tissue damage.
- **Oral medication e.g. Viagra, Cialis** - These are tablets taken between half an hour and an hour before sexual activity. You would be given a trial in the ward to ensure that there are no adverse reactions. You must be sexually aroused for the medication to work.
- **Intracavernosal injection** - The drug is injected directly into the side of the penis and works within 5-10 minutes. You, or your partner if necessary, will be taught the correct injection technique.
- **Penile Implant** – An implant is surgically implanted into the erectile tissue.

Further information regarding these options is available from the SIU patients department.



Erectile Dysfunction Treatment

Be aware...

- Erections and ejaculation could lead to autonomic dysreflexia.
- This condition can affect people with spinal cord injury at T6 and above.

The symptoms can be:

- Headache.
- Flushing.
- Sweating.
- Stuffy nose.

Treatment

- Stop any stimulation.
- Sit up.
- Take GTN if prescribed and if the pounding headache is not subsiding, call 999.



Fertility

- **Vibroejaculation** - vibrator applied to the head of the penis to achieve a reflex ejaculation. This can be tried in OPD prior to purchase / using at home. Any samples obtained can be sent to RSH for analysis.
- **Electro ejaculation** - A probe is placed in the back passage to stimulate nerves responsible for ejaculation. This is a hospital procedure and will involve sperm freezing and fertility treatment.
- **Testicular Aspiration** - this is not offered at MCSI. A needle is inserted into the testicle to aspirate sperm.
- **Retrograde Ejaculation** - this sometimes happens following a spinal cord injury resulting in the ejaculate going backwards into the bladder.



What Are My Fertility and Contraception Options?

Fertility Options

- **Self-insemination** - this can be done at home after you have had a semen analysis. This can be done at your local fertility centre. More information regarding this can be obtained from outpatients.
- **Artificial insemination** – The sperm is placed through the cervix into the vagina. This is a hospital procedure and will be done in a fertility centre.
- **IVF** – In vitro fertilization
- **ICSI** - intra cytoplasmic sperm injection

Contraception Options

- The progesterone only or mini pill
- **Depoprovera injections**
- **Intrauterine device (IUD)**. A Mirena coil may be recommended. This is an IUD which releases progesterone which has the added advantage of lessening blood flow at menstruation.
- **Condoms**
- The combined pill is not recommended due to the increased risk of deep vein thrombosis (DVT).



Fertility Treatment – Funding Following SCI

- SCI patients should be entitled to funding if they have no children.
- It can be self funded if patient has children.
- Compensation claims usually take fertility treatment into consideration.
- The GP will usually apply for funding.
- Funding is dependant on local authority policies.



Freezing Sperm

- RSH Hospital fertility appointment arranged.
- Bloods and consent.
- Funding.
- Samples collected.
- 3 separate samples are frozen.
- Post-freeze thaw of each sample to check viability.
- Frozen sperm can be transferred to other fertility centres for treatment.



Other Aspects to Know...

- **Spasms** - Some spasm can give movement which can make sex more enjoyable. Try to lie in a position which reduces spasm if it is problematic.
- **Indwelling urethral catheter** - someone from your spinal unit can give you advice regarding removal and replacement of your catheter during sexual activity.
- **Safe sex** - it is important to practice safe sex. Condoms are the safest form of protection during intercourse.



Keeping Healthy

- Eat a healthy, balanced diet.
- Always follow the bladder management advised by your Consultant.
 - Stand and relieve pressure as you have been taught
- Wear cotton underwear and loose clothing to keep your testicles cool and prevent fungal infections for women.
- Excessive amounts of alcohol can have an adverse effect on sperm count and quality.
 - Smoking can reduce the chances of pregnancy.
 - Some fertility centres refuse treatment to smokers.



Resources

There is lots more information available for reading.

Such as Spinal Injury Association - factsheet – fertility and fatherhood.
Speak to a staff member if you have any concerns or questions

