

# Introduction to Sexual Health

Sex and sexuality are important and healthy parts of being human. After a spinal cord injury (SCI) everything is new. The way you experience your body is different now. Many people with SCI are worried about their sexuality and sexual health. Often they don't know how, when or who to ask for information.

Getting used to your new body, by yourself and with a partner, is part of adjusting to life after SCI. The effect of SCI on sexual function is different for every person. Sexual activity is one way to express physical intimacy along with hugging, kissing and cuddling. Emotional closeness can include the way you think and feel about yourself and your partner.

We want you to feel comfortable discussing your questions and concerns with any team member. We can help you find the answers.

You are not alone. Questions and concerns about sexuality after SCI are common. It's important to ask for help.

## Questions that people with SCI often wonder about:

- Sexual drive/interest
- Sexual function (orgasm, ejaculation, erection, vaginal lubrication)
- Fertility and contraception
- Motor and sensory function (sexual positions, sexual aids, erogenous zones, sensory changes, spasticity)
- Bowel/bladder function
- Relationship challenges/dating
- Communication (how do I talk about sex with a partner?)
- Attractiveness and sexual self-esteem
- Secondary difficulties (e.g. autonomic dysreflexia, spasms, fatigue, depression) and medications

**Contact your Health Care Team for more information.**

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## Frequently asked questions about sexual health after SCI

### Can I still have sex?

Yes. People with SCI's can lead active and satisfying sex lives. You can be a sexual person after SCI. You can give and receive pleasure, have sex and experience fulfilling and satisfying relationships. While you may have changes in your sexual function, sexual activity is still possible.

### Will I be able to get an erection or lubricate?

Yes. However, there might be changes in your ability to achieve erections and/or vaginal lubrication. There are a variety of sexual devices that can help with lubrication, erections, stimulation and pleasure.

### Can I still have an orgasm?

Yes, many people can still have an orgasm after spinal cord injury. Your state of mind plays an important role in having orgasms. After an injury, your experience of an orgasm might also be different.

Erogenous areas are parts of your body sensitive to sexual stimulation. These areas might change after SCI. You may need to explore your body to find out what feels good for you, and what helps you have an orgasm.

### How do I manage bowel and bladder issues during sex?

Develop a bowel and bladder routine that works for you. A reliable routine can increase your confidence in social and sexual settings. Members of your team can help you develop a routine that is right for you.

### Am I still able to have children?

Yes. In general, women's ability to have children is not affected by SCI. However, there are some things to think about before and during pregnancy. It is recommended that an SCI specialist help oversee the pregnancy. For men, sperm is still being made but ejaculation and sperm quality may be affected. Specific procedures are available to help with sperm retrieval.

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## Do I still need to practice safer sex?

Yes. You still need to use contraception when having sex. It is important to remember that not all contraception offers protection against Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs).

Part of sexual safety is knowing about Autonomic Dysreflexia (AD). If you have an injury at T6 or above, sexual activity can cause AD, a medical emergency. AD is a dangerous rise in blood pressure that happens with other symptoms. You might have AD from ejaculation or orgasm. To find out more about AD, talk to your doctor.

Safe sex also means keeping your skin healthy and preventing pressure injuries. Following a SCI, you might be at higher risk of getting a pressure injury due to friction or movement in bed. Always perform a complete skin check after sex.

## How do I talk about sex and intimacy with a partner?

Being open and honest about what you need and want is very important. It is okay to talk with your partner about your physical abilities, positioning needs and erogenous zones. It is important that both of you are happy with the experience. You might get additional tips and advice by talking with peers or professionals.

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## Resources for sexual health after SCI

We can help you access these resources as needed.

Resource	Website and description
<b>Spinal Cord Injury Ontario: Sex after SCI</b>	<b>SciOntario.org</b> Includes two webcasts: Professional panel discussion on sex after spinal cord injury Overview of available sex toys and how to use them to enhance your sexual experience after an SCI.
<b>Spinal Cord Injury BC Sexual Health</b>	<b>SciSexualHealth.ca</b> This is an excellent online resource providing an easy to follow overview of sexual health after an SCI.
<b>PleasurAble: Sexual Device Manual for People with Disabilities</b>	<b>bit.ly/35Q9dSp</b> This resource explores a variety of sexual devices, safety, positioning and lubricants.
<b>Sex and Paralysis Video Series (Dr. M. Tepper)</b>	<b>DrMitchellTepper.com/sex_and_paralysis_video_series</b> Sex therapist explores sexual positions for men and women with SCI, pleasure mapping, solutions for erectile dysfunction, accessible tantra and vibrator use.
<b>Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA): Sexuality and Reproductive Health in Adults with Spinal Cord Injury</b>	<b>bit.ly/2SkuAaz</b> This guide covers many different areas of sexual health for people with SCI.
<b>Come as You Are</b>	<b>ComeAsYouAre.com</b> Accessible sex toys and devices are available online.

With acknowledgement to Parkwood Hospital for use of content.

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