Your Health: What to Do When Chronic Disease Affects Your Sex Life

The stress of having a long-term, or chronic, disease can spill over into all areas of your life, including your sex life. It can cause you to pull away from those closest to you. Some people avoid sex out of fear that it could make their disease worse.

Having a chronic disease should not mean the end of your sex life. Sex can help you stay close to your partner and add to your sense of well-being. With patience, planning, and advice, you can have a rewarding sex life.

How can chronic disease affect your sex life?
Chronic disease can affect your sex life in many ways. For example:

• Surgery can damage nerves or blood vessels, affecting your response to touch.
• Some medicines can make it harder to get excited.
• Some diseases or treatments drain your energy so you do not feel like having sex.
• Depression is common and can make you feel less sexual.
• A chronic disease can change the way you feel about your body. You may feel that your body has let you down. Medicines or other treatments can change the way you look and make you feel less attractive.
• Some chronic diseases affect blood flow, so you have less energy and get tired easily.

Your doctor can help you find out if your problem is physical or emotional.

What can you do if the problem is physical?
There are many options if your sexual problems have a physical cause. For example:

• For men, there are hormones, medicines, or special devices that aid erections, or surgery to improve blood flow.
• For women, hormones or a change of medicines can make a difference.
• For both partners, lubricants can help.

The important thing is to see your doctor and get the help you need.

What can you do if the problem is emotional?
It is normal to have a range of emotions when you are faced with a long-term illness. Some people feel worried. Some feel embarrassed about having scars from surgery or an ostomy bag. Many people grieve the loss of their hopes for the future. This can lead to depression.
If you are feeling down, try regular exercise. Exercise can help you have more energy, feel stronger, and improve your mood. Choose a type of exercise that you enjoy, such as walking, swimming, gardening, or dancing. Check with your doctor about what type of exercise is best for you.

If you have tried to have sex and failed, you may shy away from trying again. You may have fears about your performance or about your ability to have sex without symptoms occurring.

When you and your partner are ready, try the following:

- Choose a time when you are relaxed and a place that will be free from interruptions. Wait 1 to 3 hours after eating a full meal before having sex.
- Talk honestly to your partner about your concerns and feelings. This can be hard, but communication is an important part of good sex.
- Keep an open mind. If intercourse is difficult or painful, try other ways of being close, such as touching, kissing, and hugging.
- Be patient with yourself. It may take longer to get interested or reach climax.

If you continue to have problems, ask your doctor for help.

**How to talk to your doctor**

Sometimes doctors are so focused on your disease that they forget to ask about important aspects of your life, like sex. You may have to bring up the subject yourself.

It can be hard to talk about sex, even with the person you are closest to. So it can be even harder to bring it up with your doctor. To be successful, try these tips:

- If you think you will have trouble bringing up sex, practice how you will introduce the subject. You might say something like, "I have some concerns about sex, and I would like to talk about them today."
- Before your appointment, make a list of questions to ask your doctor. This may include questions about your medicines. Use the space below.
- Be as specific as possible. Tell your doctor what you have tried, what works for you, and what does not work.
- If you have trouble asking the questions directly or feel rushed, give the list to your doctor and ask for another appointment to discuss them.
- Ask your partner to go with you. Your partner may be able to give more details that can help your doctor figure out what is wrong.

**Do you have any questions or concerns after reading this information?** It's a good idea to write them down and take them to your next doctor visit.