

# Sex and relationships after stroke



## What you need to know

- › **Stroke can change how your body feels, works and how you feel about yourself. It can also affect your relationship with your partner.**
- › **Studies have not shown that sexual activity can trigger a stroke.**
- › **You may need to adapt to any physical changes, address any emotional changes, and talk to your partner or health professional.**

## How stroke can affect sex

Stroke can change how your body feels, works and how you feel about yourself. It can also change your relationships. Sex after a stroke may be affected by:

**Fear of another stroke.** Studies have not shown that sexual activity can trigger a stroke. If you are concerned, talk to your doctor.

**Physical changes.** Sexual activities can be impacted by physical changes including muscle weakness, stiffness, tightness, pain, altered sensation, mobility, fatigue and incontinence.

**Emotion and mood changes.** A stroke may change how you feel about yourself and your sexuality. It's common to feel a range of difficult emotions after a stroke:

anger, irritability and sadness. Depression and anxiety are also common after stroke. Emotional changes can impact your interest in sex.

**Relationship issues.** Changes in roles after a stroke can impact your sexual relationship, especially if one of you has taken on new responsibilities. You might be worried about how your partner will feel about you sexually. Your partner may be concerned that sex could cause you worry or pain.

**Sexual dysfunction.** Stroke is not usually a cause of sexual dysfunction. If you experience problems with getting or maintaining an erection, vaginal lubrication or reaching orgasm, it may be due to another condition such as cardiovascular disease or diabetes. It could also be a side effect of medications such as those for managing high blood pressure, depression or sleep problems.

## Things that can help

For some stroke survivors getting back to sex early on is important. Others only start to think about sex further along in their stroke recovery. Interest in sex can change throughout the recovery process.

Being in hospital can make you feel much less connected to your partner. If you are in



hospital, it's okay to ask for privacy when your partner visits so you can spend time together relaxing, talking and touching. Getting home will help but you may also need to devote time and energy to connecting in ways that build intimacy.

If you are thinking about starting to date, connecting with other stroke survivors and hearing about their experiences of dating after stroke can be helpful.

Some strategies that may help include:

**Learn how to adapt to physical changes.**

Plan for when you are well rested and have enough time. Start with activities you think may be easiest and progress to more challenging things as your confidence increases. You may need to find new positions and ways of doing things. Occupational therapists and physiotherapists can provide advice on positioning and help you practice moving into awkward positions.

If incontinence is a problem, go to the bathroom before sex. There are aids that can help and ways of managing catheters. A continence nurse can advise you.

**Address any emotional or mood changes.**

How you feel about sex is directly connected to how you feel about yourself and how you feel in general. Doing things that make you feel good will help, as will celebrating your achievements throughout your recovery. If

you think depression or anxiety is changing how you feel about sex, speak with your doctor or a health professional.

**Talk with your partner about the changes.**

Talk about how things have changed since your stroke, especially in your roles in your relationship and in life. Discuss any worries, the things you're finding difficult, as well as the things you are enjoying. Be as open as you can about your needs and desires.

It takes some courage if you are new to this. If you are having difficulty, relationship counselling can make it easier to talk things through and come up with new ways of doing things. If you have communication difficulties after your stroke, non-verbal cues such as touch can help, and your speech pathologist can suggest other strategies.

**Talk to your doctor or health professional.**

If you experience problems with erections, lubrication or reaching orgasm your doctor will be able to advise you. Do not stop taking any medicine without the advice of your doctor.

## More help

The health professionals at **StrokeLine** provide information, advice, support and referral. StrokeLine's practical and confidential advice will help you manage your health better and live well. Call **1800 STROKE** (1800 787 653) Email [strokeline@strokefoundation.org.au](mailto:strokeline@strokefoundation.org.au)

Join Australia's online stroke community with videos, fact sheets, resources and support for stroke survivors, their family and friends. [enableme.org.au](http://enableme.org.au)

Continence Helpline  
1800 33 00 66 [www.continence.org.au](http://www.continence.org.au)

Relationships Australia  
1300 364 277 [www.relationships.org.au](http://www.relationships.org.au)



The Stroke Foundation partners with the community to prevent, treat and beat stroke. We do this through raising awareness, facilitating research and supporting stroke survivors.

Contact us

 **StrokeLine 1800 STROKE (1800 787 653)**

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