



Knowledge in Motion Lecture Series

Living Healthy with Spinal Cord Injury: Sexuality



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Priorities Among People with Spinal Cord Injury

- ▶ Kennedy 2006 reported a large study of 350 respondents over 4 European countries that identified sexual activity as the area of greatest unmet need for persons with spinal cord injury.
- ▶ For individuals with **tetraplegia**, sex was rated the second highest priority after hand and arm functioning. It scored higher than walking improvement, increased sensation, bladder and bowel functioning or resolution of chronic pain.
- ▶ For individuals with **paraplegia**, sex was rated the highest priority over all other areas of functioning, regardless of the age of the person with SCI.

Journal of Neurotrauma, Anderson et al.
Spinal Cord, Anderson et al.

6-12 Months Post Discharge

- ▶ The majority of people had been sexually active in the time since discharge.
- ▶ Approximately 35% of people were dissatisfied.
- ▶ For most people, sexual adjustment had yet to be mastered.
- ▶ Many individuals appear not ready to address sexual issues.

Sexual Satisfaction and Spinal Cord Injury

- ▶ Sexual satisfaction increases with time since injury.
It takes time to adapt to the new situation and to develop problem – focused coping strategies
- ▶ People with depression and anxiety tend to be less satisfied with sexual activity.
Increased social and sexual isolation, less social support
- ▶ The more time since injury, the less reports of erectile dysfunction.

Spinal Cord, Nov. 2016

Successful Sexual Adjustment

- ▶ The ability of the person to resolve the emotional issues of the spinal cord injury.
- ▶ The individual's ability to take emotional risks.
- ▶ The extent that the individual can value new sexual behaviors and activities.
- ▶ The individual's ability to communicate.
- ▶ Successful resolution of any pre-injury sexual issues or sexual dysfunction.

Relationship Issues To Consider

- ▶ Security in the relationship
- ▶ Difficulty switching roles between care provider and lover.
- ▶ Understanding that sex may be different.
- ▶ Being supportive of each other when insecurities arise
- ▶ Being willing to work together toward the goal of a positive sexual relationship.
- ▶ Understanding that there are no failures with sex.

Common Problems for Men after SCI

▶ **Arousal difficulties**

Approximately 75% of men with SCI have difficulties achieving or maintaining erections suitable for intercourse.

▶ **Ejaculatory difficulties**

Approximately 20% of men with SCI are able to ejaculate including retrograde ejaculation. This is the major factor impacting fertility.

▶ **Orgasmic difficulties***

40-50% may experience some form of orgasm.

* Papers: Alexander, Sipski, Anderson, Elliott

Common Problems for Women after SCI

▶ **Arousal difficulties**

- sense of subjective arousal may or may not be present: objective arousal dependent on sensory preservation.

▶ **Orgasmic difficulties***

- 50% may experience some form of orgasm. However, orgasm takes longer and requires higher levels of stimulation. Orgasm may require use of a vibrator.

* Papers: Marca Sipski, Beverly Whipple, Cindy Meston

The Importance of Self Exploration

- ▶ Explore how to get erections
- ▶ Explore various erotic zones
- ▶ Explore various pressures, textures and techniques.
- ▶ Oral medications
- ▶ Explore how to maintain erections.
- ▶ You (or with a partner) when available
- ▶ Elastic, penile rings, squeezing the base of the penis

Explore Your Body: Changes in Sensation

- ▶ Where can you feel?
- ▶ What pressure can you feel?
- ▶ Any intact sensation?
- ▶ Use every available sense.
- ▶ Which part of your body is going to give you the greatest sexual pleasure.

Tips from a Sex Therapist

- ▶ Don't underestimate the importance of caressing, kissing or stimulating areas with sensation.
- ▶ Take your time and extend foreplay.
- ▶ Create a safe, non-judgmental environment.
- ▶ Give positive feedback regarding your partner's body, attractiveness and erotic qualities.
- ▶ Don't take sexual difficulties as personal.
- ▶ Be sensitive to insecurities and help your partner feel secure in the relationship and maybe, most importantly, with him or herself.

Sexual Satisfaction after SCI

- ▶ The most important correlates for sexual fulfillment are the use of a varied repertoire of sexual behaviors and the perception that the partner enjoys and is satisfied with the sexual part of the relationship.
- ▶ Erectile functioning, genital sensation and capacity for orgasm vary widely among people with SCI and are not related to sexual satisfaction.
- ▶ Relationship factors are significantly and positively related to sexual satisfaction.

J. Phelps, M Albo, K. Dunn and A. Joseph,
Archives of Sexual Behavior

A Few Final Take Home Points

- ▶ Sex will be different after injury! Open your mind to new possibilities.
- ▶ Get out of your head and stop thinking!
- ▶ When sex is stressful, people avoid it.
- ▶ Good sex is a goal, it's not going to happen the first time or early after injury.



Thank
You !