

Chronic Pain and Sex

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Here's something to think about.....

Sex can be good for pain!

Endorphins, the body's natural painkillers are released during orgasm. This, together with the closeness you feel during lovemaking, can actually better enable you to cope with your chronic pain.

As you know, living with chronic pain means there are special challenges that may make it more difficult for you or your partner to have, or enjoy sex. This handout provides you with some ideas that may help, when planning and when having sex.

Here's what we are going to talk about...

- Talking to your partner – this is the toughest, yet the most important part.
- Ways to cope with pain during sex.
- Ways to get comfortable and feel physically supported during sex.
- Ways to keep up your energy during sex.
- Being intimate without having sex.
- A quick note on depression and medications.
- A list of good websites and books.

Talk to your partner

Intimacy begins with open and honest communication.

Yes, sex can be difficult to talk about. However, with the onset of chronic pain, your body, and the way you and your partner usually have sex, has likely changed. Unfortunately, you cannot assume that your partner knows or understands your changed physical needs.

Try this... start talking about sex slowly. Talk to your partner, fully clothed, in a neutral setting – for example, in the kitchen. Start your sentence with “I”, not “you”. For example, “I love your gentle hugs” versus, “You never touch me anymore”.

This is a really good time to reconnect and to rekindle your romance. Go for walks together. Go on romantic dates. Get involved in activities that you both enjoy. Have fun together and you’ll find that it will be easier to talk.

Gradually share your feelings, your fears, and your concerns. Perhaps you believe your partner has stopped touching you because he or she has lost interest. In fact, you may discover that your partner is afraid of causing you more physical pain.

Touching, kissing, and hugging before sex, after sex and when you don’t have sex, helps your partner to feel loved and appreciated. It will probably increase your desire for sex too.

Believe it or not, having a chronic condition may actually strengthen your relationship with your partner by causing you to open up communication and to experiment with different types of physical and emotional stimulation.

A psychologist or counsellor can also help you and your partner work on issues to improve your relationship – this is worth considering.

Ways to cope with pain during sex

Relax

It is natural to feel that you may create yourself more pain by having sex. But remember, fear of more pain can actually cause an increase in muscle tension and therefore more pain. So, prior to sex, and perhaps during sex, practice your favourite relaxation technique or breathing. This helps you to let go of muscle tension and also any concerns about increased pain. The more relaxed you are, the easier your body moves, the better you cope with pain and the more you will enjoy the experience.

✳ *Here's a tip* - Some people find sex in a hot tub (not too hot) or warm bath or shower, can help with relaxation and at the same time support a painful limb.

Plan for Sex

Think about having sex at times of the day when your pain might be less or when your medications are working the best. Plan a rest period before and after sex. Think about having sex on days when you are not too busy.

Create the mood

Try for example, soft lighting, romantic music, and massage.

Know your body

Know what you need to do to keep the pain in your comfort zone. Be creative. Use whatever you need to give your body comfort and support.

✳ *Here's a tip* - Heat packs, rolled blankets, and pillows work well.

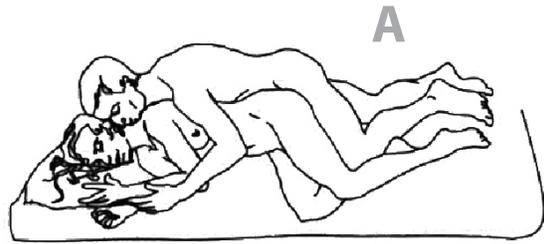
Experiment

Some positions are just too painful. Here's your chance to have fun and try different positions (while keeping your pain in your comfort zone). You may want to make use of the many sex manuals on the market for ideas. Remember to talk to your partner and agree ahead of time that if one position becomes too uncomfortable, you will try another.

✳ *Reality check* - Sex isn't like it is in the movies. Get rid of the exhausting, athletic, and unrealistic expectations created by movie stars. Sex is a gentle, tender experience that heals.

Ways to get comfortable (and feel physically supported)

You may find it more comfortable to take on the less active role. You may also find the least physically stressful position could be to lie on your back or on your side with your head supported by a pillow - See Figure A & B.



If you have difficulty finding a position that is comfortable, then find the position in which you are most comfortable when sleeping or sitting or standing and then adapt it to your sexual activity. For example, if you prefer to sleep on your side, you might prefer the sexual positions where you are lying on your side – experiment!



If you have **neck discomfort**, try to keep your neck in a neutral position. Support your head and neck with your favourite supportive pillow.

With **back pain**, keep your knees and hips bent. Support your knees with a pillow. Avoid overextending your back.



If you have **pain or sensitivity in your arm, hand, foot**, consider protecting the affected area by covering it with a pillow, wrapping it in a warm towel, a piece of silk – whatever you like. This reminds your partner not to touch this area and protects it at the same time, Figure D.



The position in Figure E may be comfortable for the male with back pain and for the female who does not wish to actively use her hands or arms. The female should support her feet with pillows and ideally have her knees higher than her hips. The male may want to put a pillow underneath his knees. If the man cannot get down on his knees, this position can also be used with the woman lying on a table, and the man standing.



Ways to keep up your energy during sex

Limit

'I'm just so tired' is a common comment. Try to limit physical activity before having sex.

Plan

Plan sexual activity for times when you feel most rested. For example, the morning is often a good time for many people.

Exercise

A general, daily exercise program will help with endurance and strength.

Rest

You may find you need to take some rest breaks during sex. This is a good time for "pillow talk". That is stroking, massaging, cuddling, and talking to your partner about what you like and dislike during sex.

Intimacy without intercourse

You can be intimate without having sex.

Alone time

Make time to be alone together. Take a bath or shower together. Share a candlelight dinner. Take a walk together. Or just hold each other in bed. A healthy intimate relationship can positively affect all aspects of your life.

Explore

Explore your partner's body through touch. Touching and being touched increases feelings of intimacy. This can include cuddling, fondling, stroking, massaging, and kissing. Tell or show your partner what kind of touching feels good to you. Listen to your partner's needs too.

A quick note about depression and medications

Depression

With chronic pain you may feel depressed or “down” in your mood. This can affect your interest in sex. Talk to your doctor about this – and it is ok to talk to your doctor about this. Sometimes the appropriate antidepressant can help, but be careful - some anti-depressants can further decrease sexual desire.

You may want to discuss your concerns with your psychologist or counsellor too (if you have one). Alternative methods of managing depression such as behavioural therapy, exercise or simply just sharing your feelings, can make a significant difference.

Medications

The side effects of opioids and other sedative medications can cause you to feel less interested in sex. If you think this may be the case, talk to your doctor about possibly changing the medication or reducing the dose. Do not stop taking the medication without talking to your doctor!

And finally...

Consider talking to your occupational therapist about additional ways that you may be able to manage pain during sex.

References and sexuality resources

Websites

www.arthritis.ca

[Intimacy and Arthritis](#): An excellent online booklet produced by the Arthritis Society as part of their Lifestyle Series. The content applies to anyone with chronic pain. Go to the Arthritis Society site. From the left menu, choose 'Managing Arthritis', then 'Living Well with Arthritis', then 'Intimacy and Arthritis'.



Books

1. *The Ultimate Guide to Sex and Disability*. Miriam Kaufman, Cory Silverberg, Fran Odette.
2. *Enabling Romance: A Guide to Love, Sex and Relationships for the Disabled (and people who care for them)*. Kroll, K. & Klein, E.
Recommended by Sexual Health Rehabilitation Service, GF Strong Rehabilitation Centre.
3. *Sex and Back Pain: Advice on Restoring Comfortable Sex That Has Been Lost to Back Pain*. Dr. Lauren Andrew Hebert.
4. *Let Me Count the Ways: Discovering Sex Without Intercourse*. Marty Klien and Riki Robbins.
5. *Healthy Pleasures*. Robert Ornstein and David Sobel

A final note:

This document was developed by the
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*Thank you to our patients with chronic pain,
who helped to write this material.*

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