

SEXUAL ACTIVITY AND HEART DISEASE, STROKE, AND HEART FAILURE

AHA Recommendation

Thousands of heart patients and stroke survivors have learned that having heart disease, a stroke or surgery doesn't mean a satisfying sex life must end. After the first phase of recovery is over, patients find that the same forms of lovemaking that they enjoyed before are still rewarding.

Many myths surround sex after heart disease and stroke. The most common one is that resuming sex often causes a heart attack, stroke or sudden death. This just isn't true. There's no reason why heart patients or stroke survivors can't resume usual sexual activity as soon as they feel ready for it. Talk with your doctor if you have any concerns.

Fears about performance and general depression can greatly reduce sexual interest and capacity. After recovery, heart patients and stroke survivors may feel depressed. This depression is normal, and in 85 percent of the cases it goes away within three months. It does tend to magnify any prior sexual problems between partners.

You and your mate or partner can prepare for sex in several ways. First, you can maintain and improve your physical conditions and personal hygiene. Second, you can be more tolerant of your emotions. Temporary mood swings are common.

What are some general guidelines for couples resuming sex?

- Choose a time when you're rested, relaxed and free from the stress brought on by the day's activities.
- Wait one to three hours after eating a full meal to allow time for digestion.
- Select a familiar, peaceful setting that's free from interruptions.
- If prescribed by your doctor, take medicine before sexual relations.

What are some guidelines for stroke survivors resuming sex?

- Be aware that your feelings about your body may have changed since your stroke.
- Try using pillows to help support your affected side during lovemaking.

Can someone still have sex after heart failure is diagnosed?

Try not to feel embarrassed about raising this question with your physician or other healthcare providers. They've heard it before.

Most people with heart failure can continue sexual relations once symptoms are under control. They may feel more comfortable and confident when following certain guidelines suggested for heart patients:

- Choose a time when you're rested, relaxed and free from the stressful feelings brought on by the day's schedules and responsibilities.
- Avoid having sex right after eating a heavy meal.
- Select a familiar, peaceful setting that's free from interruptions.
- If you start to feel uncomfortable or tired during intercourse, stop and rest for a short time.

There's no reason why heart patients can't resume usual sexual activity as soon as they feel ready to do so. However, if your condition is severe and you can't tolerate exercise, you may need to find less demanding ways to express love and affection. You could spend time hugging, kissing and touching instead.

People with heart failure should remind themselves that it's OK if they're not ready to have sex right away. Feelings like stress, anxiety and depression are natural after a serious health diagnosis and often cause a loss of interest. Patients will need to work with their partners to demonstrate their love in other ways.