

# Sexuality and Chronic Kidney Disease



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Sexuality is an important part of everyone's life. It affects how we feel about ourselves, our level of intimacy, and how we communicate with our partner.

Over half of all people with chronic kidney disease (CKD) experience some change with their sexual function. Issues can range from a lack of interest to a complete inability to reach orgasm. This can affect your self-esteem and put more stress on an already stressed intimate relationship.

Talking with your partner or your healthcare team about sexuality, orgasm, or sexual problems may feel embarrassing, but it's important to not ignore the problem. *Whatever the cause or difficulty, sexual problems can often be corrected.*

This brochure will help you to understand the causes of sexual problems related to CKD and where you can go for help. It will also suggest some things you can do for yourself and give you some tips to help you talk to your doctor or another member of your healthcare team.



## Causes of Sexual Problems

### Fatigue

Fatigue is a major factor. Any chronic illness is tiring, and this can occur with CKD, especially in the more advanced stages or when treatment with dialysis is required.

### Depression

Depression is another common issue. Many people with CKD experience periods of depression. One of the symptoms of depression is loss of interest in sexual intimacy.

### Medications

Medications can affect your ability or desire to have intercourse. Speak with your doctor. There may be other medications which are just as effective as the ones you're taking without the side effect of decreased sexual function or desire.

### Feelings About Body Image

Having a peritoneal catheter, or a fistula or graft, may cause some people to avoid physical contact for fear of what their partner will think, or because they feel less attractive.

## Diseases

Some diseases, such as vascular disease and diabetes, can lead to decreased blood flow to the genital area, decreased sexual desire, vaginal dryness, and impotence.

## How Can I Get Help?

The most important thing is to feel comfortable talking about your issues. Talk to the member of your healthcare team who makes you feel most at ease. This could be your doctor, social worker, nurse, or pharmacist.

The first step is a medical review to determine whether the problem is physical.

You may also be referred to a social worker, psychologist, psychiatrist, nurse specialist, or sexologist to look at non-medical factors.

Your assessment may be followed by counselling and education.

Learning to speak more openly with your partner is essential. By clearly expressing your needs, you can often reduce anxiety and improve your feelings about your sexuality.

## For Men

Common concerns include erectile dysfunction (problems achieving or maintaining an erection), reduced sexual desire (low libido), and ejaculation issues. Treatment options may include counselling, male hormones, medications, or a penile implant. Ask your doctor to refer you to an erectile dysfunction specialist for a complete evaluation, including a review of your medications.

## For Women

Women may also experience decreased libido. If you have problems with vaginal dryness, there are options available. There are creams and devices that contain estrogen that can be put into the vagina. You can use lubricants during intercourse. Additionally, regular sexual stimulation in any form helps improve vaginal moisture. Talk with your partner about your needs.

## What Can I Do for Myself?

Here are some things that may help change how you feel about yourself and your sexuality.

- Take extra care with personal grooming. When you feel good about your appearance, you feel better about yourself.
- Try not to think of intercourse as the *only* sex act. Remember, there are many forms of sexual expression that are satisfying but don't require as much energy. Touching, hugging, kissing, holding hands, and talking are all part of a healthy sexual relationship. Work with your partner to find enjoyable ways to give and receive pleasure.
- If you're shy, books can be a good source of information. Go to your local library or a book store and find a book that deals with your concerns. On the internet you can search for useful websites, including sites where dialysis patients post messages about sexual functioning. It can be helpful to see that sexual concerns are common, and that help is available.
- Most importantly, don't ignore the problem, and remember that a positive attitude is an important part of good physical health.

# Questions to Ask Your Healthcare Team



- What medications or treatments can help me with impotency or lack of lubrication?
- How can I protect my peritoneal dialysis catheter, fistula, or central venous catheter during intercourse?
- What about birth control when I'm on dialysis?
- Can I father a child / get pregnant when I'm on dialysis?
- What about sexual intimacy after a transplant?
- Will I be able to have a child after a transplant?

## OUR VISION

The Kidney Foundation of Canada is committed to achieving excellent kidney health, optimal quality of life, and a cure for kidney disease.

## OUR MISSION

The Kidney Foundation of Canada is the national volunteer organization committed to eliminating the burden of kidney disease through:

- Funding and stimulating innovative research for better treatments and a cure;
- Providing education and support to prevent kidney disease in those at risk and empower those with kidney disease to optimize their health status;
- Advocating for improved access to high quality healthcare;
- Increasing public awareness and commitment to advancing kidney health and organ donation.

For further information, or to help us in our efforts, please contact The Kidney Foundation office in your area. You can also visit our website at [kidney.ca](http://kidney.ca).

*The Kidney Foundation would like to acknowledge and thank the members of the Kidney Foundation's National Programs & Public Policy committee for their contributions and professional expertise in the development of this resource.*

**This material is available in accessible formats upon request by contacting [info@kidney.ca](mailto:info@kidney.ca) or calling 1-800-361-7494.**