

# SEXUALITY AND INTIMACY AFTER ACQUIRED BRAIN INJURY

## What is Sexuality?

Sexuality is an important part of who we are, how we see ourselves, and how we express ourselves. Sexuality is very personal and can mean many different things to different people. In general, it is the way we express ourselves sexually and involves our feelings, thoughts, attractions, and behaviors.

## How may an acquired brain injury impact sexuality?

A brain injury can lead to a variety of physical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral changes that may impact a person's sexual functioning. A person may have an increased or decreased desire for sex after injury. Injury to the brain can cause a person to become "hypersexual" meaning a person's sexual behaviors or urges may be difficult to control. These behaviors are due to disinhibition which is the loss of control over behavior. On the other hand, a person may have an overall decreased interest or desire for sex for reasons explained below.

### Physical changes that can affect sexuality:

- A person may experience weakness, stiffness, difficulty with coordination and balance which can change how they move during sex. They may have to explore different sexual positions than they are used to.
- They may have muscle spasms, pain or less sensation so sex might feel different.
- They may feel too tired to have sex. Tiredness can be physical and/or mental. They may not have the same physical strength as before their injury and get tired quickly. Mental tiredness can occur when they have to spend more energy to focus on one thing for a sustained amount of time which can affect their energy level.
- They may have a hard time controlling their bladder or bowel which may cause them to avoid sex or worry about having sex.
- They may be generally less interested in sex and have trouble with orgasm or erection.

### Emotional changes that can affect sexuality:

- They may feel sad, depressed, or irritable which can make them not want to have sex.
- They may be scared that having sex may increase their blood pressure and cause a stroke.
- They may be more interested in sex and talk about sex or touch themselves or you when it may be inappropriate.

- They may find it hard to control their emotions or may experience changes in their personality.
- They may see themselves differently than they did before which can affect their confidence.

#### **Cognitive changes that can affect sexuality:**

- They may have difficulty sustaining their attention to an activity like sex so it can be difficult to maintain an erection or maintain sufficient arousal to have an orgasm.
- They may have difficulty with memory therefore it may be difficult to remember what they enjoy during sex or how to initiate sexual contact.
- They may have a hard time understanding whether someone else is interested in sexual contact through their body language.
- They may have trouble coming up with words they are trying to say or may be slower to understand things.

#### **Relationship changes that can affect sexuality:**

- If you are in a relationship, it may take time for you and your partner to get used to a new “normal” after your partner’s injury.
- If you are now taking on the role of being your partner’s caregiver, it can take time for both of you to adjust to your new roles.
- Stress, physical and emotional changes can put a strain on your relationship.

### **Why do changes in sexuality and sexual functioning occur after a brain injury?**

Changes in sexual functioning may be caused by hormonal changes, medication side effects, fatigue, difficulty with movement, reduced confidence, changes in thinking abilities, emotional changes, and changes in relationships.

See link for more information: <https://msktc.org/tbi/factsheets/sexuality-after-traumatic-brain-injury>

### **When should my partner or I talk to someone?**

- Are you or your partner unsure about having sex or being intimate again?
- Does your partner have a lack of interest when it comes to sex?
- Does your partner’s increased sexual desire or actions make you feel uncomfortable?

## Who can I talk to if I have more questions?

Gaylord has a team of trained medical professionals consisting of psychiatrists, physician assistants, physical therapists, occupational therapists, speech therapists, nurses, and social workers who can help you with challenges you may be having with sexuality after your brain injury. You can also contact your primary care physician, urologist or gynecologist with questions. Some people may feel embarrassed talking to others about sexual issues, but it's important to keep in mind that sexuality is a normal part of human functioning and our team of medical professionals are here to help.

## What is intimacy?

Intimacy is how we show devotion to one another, how we support each other, and how we connect with one another. It's the closeness felt between people in personal relationships.

As humans, we thrive on having close personal relationships and having the ability to connect with others. Intimacy doesn't only refer to having sex. Intimacy can be shared between romantic partners, friends, or family members.

## Ways to engage in intimacy with your partner

- Maintain open communication with your partner and share your thoughts and feelings with one another
- Bonding over common interests or just spending time with one another
- Touching including hugging, cuddling, holding hands or kissing are physical ways to create intimacy with your partner

## Changes in intimacy after acquired brain injury

- You may have to learn how to communicate with your partner differently
- You may have to relearn how to be intimate with your partner and learn new ways to connect and feel close to one another
- Changes in roles (taking on a caregiver role for your partner) can change your overall relationship dynamic and affect intimacy
- Cognitive changes may result in your partner not having the ability to know how to initiate or engage in intimacy or sex like they used to

Establishing intimacy with your partner after their brain injury is very important, but will ultimately take time along with consistent effort and communication between you and your partner. It is important for partners to know that support is available, either independently or as a couple.



**Contact:**

Kaila Morin, PT, DPT  
kmorin@gaylord.org

(203) 284-2800 ext. 3614