

SEXUAL INTIMACY AND PARKINSON'S

Approximately 50% of men and women with Parkinson's disease will experience intimacy and sexual problems (Bronner & Vodušek, 2011). You are not alone with the symptoms, and you are definitely not alone if you have difficulty talking about it.

Sexual functioning and well-being of people with Parkinson's and their partners are affected by many factors, including motor symptoms, non-motor symptoms, medication effects and relationship issues. The most common sexual problems in people with Parkinson's are decreased desire, erectile dysfunction, difficulties in reaching orgasm and sexual dissatisfaction (Bronner et al., 2015). Parkinson's does not have to put an end to your love life. Though the disease is different for everyone, here are five tips to keep in mind.

1. Find Information and Support

Don't be embarrassed to ask your doctor about the sexual implications of Parkinson's and the sexual effects of your medications. They have heard the questions before and will have some advice. Next, search the internet: "sexual effects of..." then list your medications. You may get different answers, but you will come away with a useful overview.

Self-Help Books

Female Sexuality:

- Julia Heiman & Joseph LoPiccolo, *Becoming Orgasmic*
- Kathryn Hall, *Reclaiming Your Sexual Self*
- Lonnie Barbach, *For Yourself: The Fulfillment of Female Sexuality*

Male Sexuality:

- Michael Metz & Barry McCarthy, *Coping with Erectile Dysfunction*
- Michael Metz & Barry McCarthy, *Coping with Premature Ejaculation*

Couple's Sexuality:

- Esther Perel, *Mating in Captivity: Unlocking Erotic Intelligence*
- Sandra Leiblum & Judith Sachs, *Getting the Sex You Want*
- Michael Metz & Barry McCarthy, *Enduring Desire*
- Paul Joannides, *The Guide to Getting it On*
- Lonnie Barbach, *For Each Other: Sharing Sexual Intimacy*

2. Be Flexible

If you define "sex" as just intercourse, and can no longer do that, you might think that your sex life is history. However, if your definition of sex is more flexible, then bidding farewell to intercourse is like passing up one dish at a huge buffet. Even if you can't have intercourse, there are many ways to enjoy physical intimacy, fulfilling lovemaking and orgasm. Satisfying sex is based on leisurely, playful whole-body massage. Even those in the later stages of Parkinson's can often kiss, cuddle, receive massages and other forms of sexual pleasure, and provide it. Focus not on your disabilities, but on your abilities.

3. Stay as Healthy as Possible

"How can I be healthy?" you ask, "I have Parkinson's disease." Yes, you do. But you'll feel better, have an easier time managing your symptoms, and retain more sexual interest and ability if your lifestyle is as

healthy as possible. Engage with your doctor and allied healthcare team and come up with a plan that will help you maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Here are some points to consider:

- If you smoke, quit.
- Drink alcohol in moderation.
- Eat at least five servings of fruits and vegetables a day.
- Within your abilities, strive for regular moderate exercise, ideally 20 to 30 minutes a day.
- Try to get at least seven hours of sleep a night.
- Look after your mental health. Depression affects at least 50% of people with Parkinson's and it can rob you of your interest in sex and other activities you would normally find enjoyable. If you are depressed, or suspect you might be, or experiencing burnout, speak to your doctor. Depression is treatable!

4. Look for New Opportunities

Having Parkinson's means grieving the loss of things you can no longer do, among them, how you had sex. But if you stop there, you wind up depressed — and depression kills libido and erotic enjoyment. As time passes, look for new opportunities for fun and personal growth — including new approaches to making love. If you feel comfortable, explore sexual accessories. Try a few; you may discover they enhance your intimate experience with your partner. You can find them at adult shops or various online sites:

The Art of Loving
369 West Broadway,
Vancouver, BC
www.artofloving.ca

Womyn's Ware
896 Commercial Drive,
Vancouver, BC
www.womynsware.com

Come As You Are
Toronto, Ontario
www.comeasyouare.com

5. Consider Sex Therapy

Sex therapists are psychotherapists with advanced training in sexual issues. They discuss your situation, suggest ways you can enjoy sex and assign erotic "homework." The process typically takes a few months of weekly appointments, and studies show that two-thirds of people who consult sex therapists report significant benefit.

The desire for too much sex can also create issues; hypersexuality is one of a broad range of impulse control disorders reported in Parkinson's, attributed to antiparkinsonian therapy, mainly dopamine agonists (Bronner et al., 2015). If you or your partner notice issues with hypersexuality, talk to your doctor immediately.

Sources

- Bronner, G., Aharon-Peretz, J., & Hassin-Baer, S. (2015). *Sexuality in patients with Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease, and other dementias*. Handbook of clinical neurology (Vol. 130, pp. 297-323). Elsevier.
- Bronner, G., Hassin-Baer, S., & Gurevich, T. (2017). *Sexual Preoccupation Behavior in Parkinson's Disease*. Journal of Parkinson's disease, 7(1), 175-182.
- Bronner, G., & Vodusek, D. B. (2011). *Management of sexual dysfunction in Parkinson's disease*. Therapeutic Advances in Neurological Disorders, 4(6), 375–383. <http://doi.org/10.1177/1756285611411504>