Sex and Heart Disease

Sex after heart attack or heart surgery

Usually you can resume sex within a few weeks after a heart attack or heart surgery. However, some people are less active. This may be due to anxiety, depression, or lack of desire.

You may feel more comfortable easing back into sex by touching, holding and caressing. In the beginning, you and your spouse can feel loved and secure without the demands to perform. As you get more confident, you will feel more at ease with yourself and your partner.

Sex and your heart

Several changes occur in your body during sex, and you may be more aware of them now. Rest assured that these too are normal. For instance, as you get aroused, your breathing slowly increases. Your skin also gets flushed. Your heart rate and blood pressure also go up slightly. As you get more excited, sexual tension builds. Both heart rate and blood pressure rise even more. Your heart rate can go up as high as 90 to 145 beats/min. During orgasm, you release this pent-up tension and your heart rate, blood pressure and breathing return to resting levels.

How do psychological factors affect sex?

Many heart patients find emotional barriers to sex stronger than any physical limitations. These feelings can include:

• Being depressed
• Having trouble sleeping, or sleeping too much, especially during the day
• Eating more or less than usual

• Being less interested in life
• Feeling tired all the time (especially after activity)
• Worrysome thoughts

These feelings are common. But in most cases, they go away within 3 months after a heart attack or surgery. Problems with sex may increase if you remain depressed. This loss of desire is often added to a false fear that sex will cause a heart problem. If you find that you stop having sex, or periods between when you normally would have intercourse are longer, you may want to seek counseling. A counselor can help with your fears and concerns, as well as those of your partner.

Will medicines affect sex?

The following medications for heart problems can affect sexual desire and how you perform:

• Blood pressure medications
• Fluid pills
• Tranquilizers
• Antidepressants
• Medications used for chest pain or irregular heartbeat

Male sex problems may include the inability to achieve or maintain an erection. Some men also may have premature ejaculations or none at all. A woman may not have enough vaginal fluid, which can make intercourse painful. Some women may not get sexually aroused or be able to have an orgasm. If you are experiencing any of these symptoms, talk to your doctor, as there are often things that can be done to help (e.g., lubrication, other medications).
Preparing for sex
You may find that the following suggestions put you on the road to a healthy sex life as well:

• *Have a healthy daily balance of diet, exercise, rest and medicine.*

• *Exercise boosts health and confidence.* Activities such as walking, swimming and dancing can decrease rapid heart rate, shortness of breath or chest pain during sex.

• *If you smoke, stop.* St. Paul’s Hospital has a smoking cessation program that can help.

• *Be patient.* Try to understand your emotions. You or your partner may be nervous after a heart attack or surgery. Your emotions may change quickly from tears to laughter, or from joy to anger. These sudden mood swings are generally temporary.

• *Adjust what you expect from one another sexually.* You may have had a good sex life before your heart problem. You may be afraid to resume sex, but don’t let it stop you from enjoying each other again.

• *Avoid rushing into sex to prove things are back to normal.* If you and your partner have sex before you’re ready, it may only reinforce your fears.

• *Coping as a couple.* Your partner may not know when to help and when to back off. In most cases, spouses are over-protective, and this can lead to conflict. Your partner may be worried about the risk of cardiac symptoms during sex. Also, if there were pre-existing problems with sex, these may get worse after a heart attack or surgery.

• *Specific suggestions.* Choose a time when you are both rested and free from stress. Wait 1-3 hours after eating. Avoid alcohol. Take your usual medications prior to having sex. Use water-soluble lubricant as it may make penetration easier. Remember that there are lots of ways of expressing your affection.

Symptoms to be concerned about
You will likely experience normal changes during sex - flushed skin, increased heart rate. However, other changes indicate you are doing too much. These include:

• Pressure, pain or discomfort in your jaw, neck, chest, arm, or stomach
• Extreme shortness of breath
• Very rapid or irregular heart beats.

If you have any of these symptoms during sex, tell your partner, stop what you are doing, and rest. Take nitroglycerin if you have a prescription. It is important that you talk to your doctor about these symptoms at your next visit, but if they do not go away with rest, CALL 911.

Final thoughts
When you and your partner understand more about the fears and desires involved in your sex life, you may begin to feel better about sex, as well as other areas of your life. The truth is that heart disease may alter your life in ways you had not thought. But it also can allow you to reflect on what’s important. In the process you may learn more about yourself and those around you. This information is of a general nature and may vary according to your special circumstances.