



## Sex After Heart Attack or Heart Surgery

After a heart attack or heart surgery, most patients can return safely to the lovemaking they enjoyed before their illness. Right now, you may have questions about sex, just as you might have questions about diet and exercise.

These pages offer some general guidelines about sexual activity after a heart attack or heart surgery. Each patient is different, so ask your health care provider if he or she has special advice for you.

### Will my heart be able to handle sex?

You may fear that sex will be too much of a strain on your heart now. This is a common concern, but keep in mind that sex is not the strain you may think it is. During sex, your heart rate and blood pressure rise and you breathe faster. These are normal responses, but you may be more aware of them now. The heart behaves in much the same way as it does when you're climbing two flights of stairs or taking a brisk walk. The heart works hardest during orgasm, which lasts only 15 to 30 seconds.

### Will I be ready for sex?

You are ready right now to start enjoying many things that don't demand much from your heart, such as holding hands, touching, hugging and kissing. This will help you get in touch with your partner again and bring you closer together. Gradually, you can work up to intercourse. Talk to your doctor about when you may be ready for sexual intercourse.

Some people need to wait longer due to special problems. Ask your doctor how long you should wait. How you feel mentally and physically is more important than how much time has passed. Some people do not feel ready for more than gentle contact for weeks.

### Will I ever feel like having sex again?

Your desire for sex probably will return in time, but right now there may be several things in the way:

- **Fatigue** – Most likely, you will be very tired during the first part of recovery. Your sleep patterns may not return to normal for a while.
- **Emotions** – You may be moody and tearful, blue or “down in the dumps.” This is common during the first weeks at home, but if it doesn't improve in time, talk to your doctor. Counseling has helped many people through this stage.
- **Discomfort** – After heart surgery, you may be uncomfortable for several weeks as you heal.
- **Medicines** – Some drugs may affect a person's desire or ability to have sex. Examples are certain blood pressure pills, water pills, tranquilizers and beta blockers (a type of heart medicine). Your doctor can tell you if a change could be made in your medicines.
- **Worry** – You may worry about many things right now, such as your job, your family or your finances – this can add to the stress of recovery.

### A message to partners

It is normal to feel nervous. You may be afraid of hurting your partner or saying or doing something wrong. These feelings are natural, but it is important to deal with them. Your fears can make your partner's fears worse.

Read what you can about sex and heart disease. Knowing that sex can be resumed safely, and having guidelines to follow, will help to reassure you. Talk to the nurse or health care provider about your concerns and don't be afraid to ask questions.

Most importantly, **talk with your partner**. Let him or her know there is plenty of time and no pressure to perform. Keep talking, keep listening and don't lose your sense of humor

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### **Will sex cause another heart attack?**

The chances are slim, especially during sex with your usual partner. Sex puts only a moderate amount of stress on the heart. Sex with a new partner may put more strain on your heart.

Some persons may have angina (chest pain) or other symptoms during sex. These symptoms might be avoided by planning ahead (suggestions follow) and seeking advice from your doctor.

### **What if everything doesn't go right the first time?**

It may not. Don't let this worry or surprise you. It's probably due to fear or anxiety rather than a physical problem, so don't pressure yourself. Take time to find out what works best for you. Remember that tension will work against you and relaxation will work for you.

### **Guidelines for sex**

- If you are nervous and afraid, talk about it with your partner, who is probably as uneasy as you are. An open mind and a sense of humor should help relieve your fears.
- Pace yourself, even if your doctor says you're ready for sex. Work up gradually to your usual sex life, just as you would work up to any other activity. Spend more time on foreplay to allow your pulse and blood pressure to rise gradually. Do only as much as you feel like doing – nobody is timing you.
- Choose a time of day when you are rested and relaxed. Morning is often one of the best times. Make sure the room temperature is comfortable.
- Wait a few hours after eating a heavy meal or drinking alcohol to avoid putting added stress on your heart.
- Choose a comfortable position that allows you to breathe easily.
- Other sexual activities, such as oral or manual stimulation and masturbation, are usually safe and do not cause undue strain.

### **Get yourself in shape!**

- Exercise regularly. This is one of the best ways to help yourself recover. Exercise strengthens your body and helps you feel good about yourself.
- Get enough sleep. Most people need six to eight hours of sleep each night to function at their best. During the first weeks at home, you will need even more.
- Relax. If you never feel relaxed or have trouble dealing with stress, ask your doctor or nurse for information that will help you.

### **When should I call the doctor?**

If any of the following occur, call your health care provider and postpone further sex until you report what happened:

- Rapid pulse, rapid breathing or shortness of breath for 10 to 15 minutes or longer after sex
- Irregular heartbeat or palpitations (fluttering) for 10 to 15 minutes or longer after sex
- Trouble sleeping after sex or feeling very tired the day after

### **If you have chest pain or pressure during sex:**

- Stop what you are doing and rest.
- Take nitroglycerin, if you have it, as directed.
- Report the chest pain or pressure to your health care provider, calling right away if the chest pain does not stop. Some people may be advised to take nitroglycerin before sex if chest pain continues to occur.

### **Note:**

There are several medicines available for male erectile dysfunction. These medicines may interfere with other heart medicines and may be harmful to people with heart disease. Please discuss these medicines with your doctor before use.