



Talking sexual wellbeing and intimacy after stoma surgery

Let's start the conversation



Sexual wellbeing is much more than just sex

After stoma surgery, it's natural to feel sensitive about how your body has changed, and be concerned about how it might affect intimacy and your sex life in the future.

Sexual wellbeing is an important part of everyone's life, regardless of whether you are in a committed relationship, enjoying or thinking about dating, not sexually active, or unpartnered². It covers many areas including body image and self-esteem, sexual function, reproductive health, emotional and physical satisfaction, and can impact on both your physical and mental wellbeing^{1, 2}.

Pleasurable, fulfilling and fun sexual and intimate experiences are not out of bounds because you've had stoma surgery. And no matter what your relationship status, age, gender or sexuality, starting the conversation about your sexual wellbeing is just as important as the discussions around diet, exercise, skin issues and generally living with your stoma.



1.A Cross-National Study of Subjective Sexual Well-Being Among Older Women and Men: Findings From the Global Study of Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors Publication Title: Springer. Publication Date: 4/2006 . Author: Laumann, Edward; Paik, Anthony; Glasser, Dale; Kang, Jeong-Han; Wang, Tianfu; Levinson, Bernard; Moreira, Edson; Nicolosi, Alfredo; Gingell, Clive 2.What is sexual wellbeing and why does it matter for public health? Kirstin R Mitchell, Ruth Lewis, Lucia F O'Sullivan, J Dennis Fortenberry. Lancet Public Health 2021; 6: e608-13. Published Online. June 21, 2021. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(21\)00099-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(21)00099-2)

Thinking about your sexual wellbeing

Everyone is different, so of course, every stoma journey is different too.

Some people will put all their physical and emotional energy into their new diagnosis and ongoing treatment. Others, who may have been living with their condition for a long time, will feel that their surgery really has given them their life back.

The priority of the healthcare professionals is looking after your medical condition and functional aspects of your stoma management. So it is possible they might overlook wider issues that impact on your mental and sexual wellbeing. That is why you shouldn't be afraid to bring up the subject yourself.

Wherever you are in your journey, your sexual wellbeing is an important part of who you are, and we hope that the information contained here will help you to start the conversation with partners, friends and the medical professionals caring for you.

- Clinical studies have explored the effects of stomas on psychosocial issues, including sexual wellbeing. People with new ostomies expressed altered body image, which can result in changes to sexual wellbeing and libido. People felt worried about what their spouse might think of the changes to their body, while others felt undesirable after surgery.¹
- An estimated 75% of healthcare professionals feel uncomfortable discussing the topic with their patients - despite recognizing the importance⁴



An estimated 75% of healthcare professionals hesitate to discuss this topic with their patients.



1. Ayaz-Alkaya S. Overview of psychosocial problems in individuals with stoma: A review of literature. *Int Wound J*. 2019 Feb;16(1):243-249. doi: 10.1111/iwj.13018. Epub 2018 Nov 4. PMID: 30392194; PMCID: PMC7948730. 2. Wuletaw Chane Zewude, Tilahun Derese, Yisihak Suga, Berhanetsehay Teklewold: Quality of Life in Patients Living with Stoma. *Ethiop J Health Sci*. 2021;31(5):993. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ejhs.v31i5.113. Silva, G. M., Hull, T., Roberts, P. L., Ruiz, D. E., Wexner, S. D., Weiss, E. G., ... Sands, D. (2008). The Effect of Colorectal Surgery in Female Sexual Function, Body Image, Self-Esteem and General Health: A Prospective Study. *Annals of Surgery*, 248(2), 266-272. doi:10.1097/4.McGrath, M., Low, M. A., Power, E., McCluskey, A., & Lever, S. (2021). Addressing Sexuality Among People Living With Chronic Disease and Disability: A Systematic Mixed Methods Review of Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices of Health Care Professionals. *Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation*, 102(5), 999-1010. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apmr.2020.09.379 sla.0b013e3181820cf4

Don't be afraid to ask about your sexual wellbeing

If you want to discuss your sexual wellbeing with your stoma care nurse or doctor, don't be shy. They will be open to talking with you about this and will welcome you broaching the subject.

- In another study, the majority of patients (78.1%) reported being sexually active before stoma surgery. Only 34% of them resumed sexual activity after the surgery²
- A colorectal surgery study found that, when asked about the importance of discussing sexual issues, more than 80% of women stated it to be extremely or somewhat important. Almost all participants reported a lack of knowledge, feelings of embarrassment, or inappropriateness as barriers to talking about sexuality.³



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What does intimacy really mean?

When you think of intimacy you might think only of physical or sexual intimacy but another type, that doesn't involve sex or even touch, is emotional intimacy, and it's this that helps us to connect more deeply with a partner.

Through emotional intimacy, we share our feelings and express trust and understanding, which helps us to feel comfortable and secure.

The more you share your thoughts about your stoma with your partner - how it makes you feel and your concerns about what it might mean to them - the stronger the bond between you can become. Communication from both sides is key to reducing any fears and anxieties that both of you might have about intimacy after stoma surgery.

As part of the physical healing process, it's important to take your time after your op, but touch should not hurt your stoma. Your stoma has no nerve endings, so you'll feel no sensations from it, although if it's irritated it may bleed slightly, so you might need to adjust positions. Once you feel emotionally ready to have sex with your partner or start a new intimate relationship, there's nothing to stop you.

If you're not ready, don't rush

For some, intimacy will be one of the most important aspects of life they want to reignite post-surgery, and for others, it might be the last thing on their minds.

Whatever your point of view, it's absolutely right for you. Everyone is different, so go at your own pace and start thinking about sexual intimacy only when you feel ready.

If you have a partner, it's a good idea to talk to them about how you feel, as they might also be feeling anxious about approaching the subject. Don't put yourself or your partner under any pressure; there's no rush, just go with the flow.

If you're struggling with body image, you are not alone - a lot of people have hang-ups about one part of their body or another. Take all the time you need to get used to your ostomy and how this new part of your body has made a positive difference to your life.





When you are ready....

Communication is key when it comes to re-establishing or even beginning a new sexual relationship. Whatever your age, gender or sexual orientation, and whether you're in a committed relationship, or with a new partner, it's important to make time to talk.

Start early If you get an opportunity before surgery, then this may be a good time to start talking about intimacy with your partner. Let them know your initial worries and concerns and ask them to share theirs too. You'll probably find you have a lot in common.

Be open and honest As you've been through a lot already, with your condition, surgery and recovery, now is the time to give yourself a break. Rather than bottling things up and dealing with your feelings alone, talking about it all with your partner could go a long way to easing any anxieties you have.

No pressure Don't set timelines or unrealistic expectations. A kiss and a cuddle is a good way to start building intimacy again following surgery. Listen to your body and take things one step at a time.

Share a giggle Okay, stomas can make noises, but this can happen to anyone during intimate moments. And if your pouch gets in the way, try a new position. Don't take yourself and the situation too seriously and have fun.

Food for thought Thinking about what you eat before getting intimate is always a good idea. Foods that may trigger gas include spicy and fatty foods, beans, chewing gum

and carbonated drinks, so are probably best avoided.

Bedside must-haves After surgery it's often recommended that you use a good-quality lubricant to minimise discomfort. Of course, intimacy does not have to involve penetration, and if you use toys, these can help sensitivity to return.

And just so you know If, prior to surgery, the rectum was used during intercourse, and you are having surgery to remove it, it is important to talk to your surgeon beforehand to discuss the possibility of keeping the rectum intact. You should never insert anything into your stoma.





Prep and products to banish anxiety

The last thing you want if intimacy is on the cards is to feel anxious about how your pouching system is going to behave. There are plenty of ways you can prepare, and a good start is to make sure you empty your pouch beforehand. There are also a whole range of products available that have been designed to make sure you feel secure, comfortable and confident, and ready for anything.

ESENTA Skin Barrier Creates a breathable barrier that protects the skin from damage caused by adhesives, body waste and enzymes.

Diamonds™ Gelling Sachets This output solidifier, which turns liquid into gel, features ActiveOne™ Odour Control and helps to eliminate excess wind.

Mouldable™ Technology Using our unique LEAK-LOCK™ system, this gives you a baseplate that hugs the skin, creating a secure fit.

ease Strips™ Designed to keep your skin barrier secure, these skin-friendly strips are designed to move with the body.



For any product samples see QR codes on page 14



What and how to tell a new partner

It's up to you who you tell about your stoma, but if you're entering into a new relationship with someone who you'd like to be intimate with, it's understandable to feel a bit nervous.

You don't have to share this information on your first date, but sooner is generally better than later. If you're really getting to know all about each other, you'll probably find that it crops up naturally in the conversation anyway, as the condition leading to your stoma has no doubt had a big impact on your life and is part of your story.

Just trust that you'll find the right time to tell a potential new partner about your stoma. The chances are, just like your friends and family, they will ask a few questions, and ultimately understand it's just one part of who you are.

Issues that can affect everyone, stoma or not

The most common issues reported to us from people following stoma surgery are feeling they must resume intimate relationships straightaway, and a fear of disappointing their partner.

Talking with your partner about these concerns before surgery can help to make sure you both have realistic expectations.

Two very common conditions that can affect sexual intimacy - vaginal dryness and erectile dysfunction - can be experienced by men and women at all stages of life, and whether they have a stoma or not.



Vaginal dryness

Around 17% of women aged 18-50, and more than half of post-menopausal women aged over 51 will experience vaginal dryness. Menopause, surgery, cancer treatments and some medication, such as anti-depressants and hormonal contraceptives, can also increase the chances of this occurring.

Vaginal dryness can cause pain or discomfort during penetration, and may be eased by the use of lubricants. Lubrication products can reduce friction against the scar tissue caused by surgery, and are widely available in High Street stores and online.

If you use the pill, you may need to change your birth control, particularly if you have an ileostomy, as oral contraceptives are often not absorbed with a shorter small intestine.

If you have any concerns or questions about vaginal dryness or birth control, talk to your doctor or stoma care nurse.

Erectile dysfunction

Also known as impotence, erectile dysfunction is the inability to achieve or maintain an erection, or to ejaculate, and is a very common condition. It is estimated that it affects half of all men aged between 40 and 70 at some point in their lives, and amongst its possible causes, which can be physical or psychological, is surgery.

If you experience erectile dysfunction symptoms, there are a number of steps you can take which may help, such as quitting smoking, losing weight if you're overweight, reducing your alcohol intake and managing stress or anxiety.

There are also treatments available from your doctor, including the medication Viagra and vacuum pumps. Don't feel you have to manage alone, and don't be embarrassed. You can talk to your stoma nurse or your doctor about erectile dysfunction - they will be able to offer advice or refer you to a sexual health clinic or therapist.



Pregnancy with a stoma

Many women with an ostomy worry that pregnancy will be an issue after surgery, but in the vast majority of cases, it shouldn't be, and most women are able to enjoy a very typical experience.

Fertility

Having a stoma shouldn't affect your fertility, however the condition that led to your surgery might. Speak to your stoma nurse or doctor if you are thinking about trying for a baby.¹

Diet

Generally, dietary advice if you're pregnant and have a stoma is the same as it is for women without a stoma - maintaining a healthy diet throughout pregnancy is important for anyone.

If there is a particular food that didn't agree with you before pregnancy, then it should be avoided. There's no need to eat for two during pregnancy, but increasing certain foods such as proteins

is recommended. Vitamin and mineral deficiencies are not uncommon when you have a stoma, so you may need to have some blood tests and/or take vitamin supplements.

Speak to your stoma nurse or doctor about pregnancy and your stoma, and always follow their advice, which may include referring you to a dietitian.

Hydration

This is key during pregnancy to help avoid urinary infections.¹ You should also

speak to your stoma nurse or doctor about how to manage your electrolytes, particularly if you have an ileostomy.

Body Changes

During pregnancy, you might notice that your stoma protrudes more than usual. Don't be alarmed - it should return to its normal size afterwards, but you'll need to measure your stoma more frequently during pregnancy as you may need to alter your pouching system as your abdomen changes in shape and size.

Your stoma will usually return to its usual size about four weeks after pregnancy. If you have any concerns, speak to your stoma nurse or doctor.

Delivery

The preferred method of delivery will always be vaginal, even if the rectum has been removed.^{2,3}

Try to enjoy your pregnancy and look forward to welcoming the new addition to your family free from worry. If there's anything you're struggling with, or any questions you have, don't hesitate to contact your doctor, midwife or stoma nurse, who will be able to put your mind at rest.³



1) Pregnancy, delivery, and postpartum experiences of fifty-four women with ostomies Van Horn C.; Barrett, P. Journal of wound, ostomy, and continence nursing : official publication of The Wound, Ostomy and Continence Nurses Society.
2) Ostomy and pregnancy. Gopal, Kris A.; Amshel, Albert L.; Shonberg, Irving L.; Levinson, Bradley A.; VanWert, Margaret; VanWert, John Diseases of the Colon & Rectum.
3) The embodied experience of pregnancy with an ileostomy. Journal of Clinical Nursing. 09621067. 10/7/2018. 27 (21-22) p.3931-3944 Whiteley, Ian; Gullick, Janice.



Why not try...

If you're looking for ways to ensure you feel at ease during moments of intimacy, there's a range of items available designed to do just that.

Undies

Specially designed women's panties and lingerie and men's briefs have inner pockets to conceal your pouch and hold it firmly and snugly against your body.

Wraps

Stylish pouch covers, and wraps with a pocket for your pouch, come in an assortment of colours, patterns and materials.

Alternative pouches

Smaller, and closed-end pouches might suit you more during times of intimacy than your regular pouch.

A range of products

There are many products on the market designed to make you feel secure during intimate moments. See Page 8 for details.

Positions

If you find your pouch is getting between you and your partner, try the side-by-side, or spooning, position. It will stop your pouch from falling to the side and ensure that no weight is put on it.



Want to talk?

We are with you every step of the way on your stoma journey, and we are always here if and when you need us.

If you're struggling and need someone to talk to about any issue at all, simply pick up the phone. Our Customer Care Advisors, Product Specialists and team of dedicated Stoma Nurses are just a phone call away, and can offer advice and tips on products, lifestyle choices, medical issues and so much more.

**Call our Customer Care Agents
on 0800 88 50 50**

**Or via email
enquiry@xxxxxxxxxx**



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