



Addressing the sexual challenges that can come with diabetes

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Many people with diabetes find it difficult to talk about the sexual dysfunction that can result from the condition. Though issues of sexual dysfunction are common for both men and women with diabetes, a study in *Diabetes Today* found that only **19% of women and 50% of men** bring up the topic with their medical team. **The good news is that there are numerous solutions readily available to address diabetes-related sexual problems.**

The causes of sexual issues

Sexual dysfunction generally refers to anything that happens on a regular basis to inhibit sexual response, from erectile dysfunction (ED) to a lowered libido. Of course, this happens in the general population as well as in people with diabetes, but **those with diabetes are at greater risk** for a number of reasons, the chief culprit being chronic high blood sugar.

The following are a few ways that diabetes can lead to sexual dysfunction:

Blood vessel damage

Having unregulated high blood sugar over long periods of time can damage blood vessels, including the ones that lead to the penis. This may restrict blood flow, which can cause men to lose sensation or erectile function. For women, blood vessel damage can reduce vaginal lubrication, which can make sex painful.

Nerve damage

Diabetic neuropathy can affect sexual desire in both men and women by causing lowered genital sensation and difficulty in reaching orgasm.

Hormonal fluctuations

Changes in insulin and glucose levels are known to cause hormone disruptions. Studies have shown that men with type 2 diabetes have about twice the risk of low testosterone as men without diabetes—and lowered testosterone can also mean lowered sexual desire. For women, the picture is more complex, but diabetes can cause changes to estrogen levels which can decrease sexual desire.

Inflammation

Inflammation is a common issue for people with diabetes, as high blood sugar levels trigger the body's inflammation response. Sexual desire has its origins in the brain and scientists have postulated that if inflammatory molecules cross the blood-brain barrier into areas that affect sexual desire, lowered libido may ensue.

Mental and emotional challenges

Beyond the physical, there are a number of emotional challenges for people with diabetes that can lead to sexual difficulties.

Self-consciousness can be an issue, especially with a new partner. If a person is wearing a diabetes pump, for instance—what to do with it during sex? The answer is that it can be temporarily disconnected. In fact, in one study, three-quarters of respondents indicated that they disconnected their pumps simply so that the device wouldn't get knocked accidentally.

People with diabetes that is not well-managed often suffer from "**diabetes fatigue**," meaning they feel excessively tired because high blood sugar disrupts the body's ability to use sugar for energy.

Studies have found that a significant number of people with diabetes (in some studies up to 40%) take **antidepressants**; that's a good thing, because antidepressants have been found to lower the risk of death and serious diabetic complications, in part because they have been linked to **better glycemic control and diabetic self-care in general**. However, for people on antidepressants, one of the side effects may be a reduced libido.

Finding your way to a happier sex life

These issues may seem daunting, but there is help available. The first thing to do is **talk to your doctor** about any issues with sexual dysfunction that you may be having.

For men, pills such as **Viagra or Cialis** work quite efficiently in increasing blood flow to the penis. You can also ask your doctor to test your testosterone levels and see if testosterone shots might be indicated.

Twice as many women with diabetes experience vaginal dryness as those without diabetes. While this can be a result of aging, it can also come from diabetic nerve damage. Fortunately, **over the counter lubricants** can help with vaginal dryness. Nerve damage may also result in a lack of feeling in the clitoris, so speak to your doctor if this is something you're struggling with.

The best thing you can do is make **lifestyle changes** that help you keep your blood glucose levels where they should be. This includes **exercising, eating healthy foods**, taking your **medication** and trying to **reduce stress**.



Did You Know?

Seeking out a mental health counselor is also a great idea to help you and your partner reduce any tension that diabetic sexual dysfunction may cause.

Sources: <https://diabetes.org/health-wellness/sexual-health/sex-diabetes#~:text=Low%20libido%2C%20or%20sexual%20desire,lower%20your%20blood%20glucose%20levels> | <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/317194> | <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/erectile-dysfunction/in-depth/erectile-dysfunction/art-20043927> | <https://health.clevelandclinic.org/the-link-between-diabetes-and-sexual-dysfunction> | <https://www.aarp.org/health/healthy-living/info-2023/healthy-sex-life-with-diabetes.html> | [https://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/risk-factors/diabetes-and-men.html#~:text=Erectile%20dysfunction%20\(ED\),needed%20to%20have%20an%20erection](https://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/risk-factors/diabetes-and-men.html#~:text=Erectile%20dysfunction%20(ED),needed%20to%20have%20an%20erection) | <https://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/risk-factors/diabetes-and-women-1.html>

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