A close-up photograph of two hands clasped together, one appearing to be in a white sleeve and the other in a brown sleeve. They are holding hands on a sandy beach with the ocean and a bright sunset in the background, creating a warm, golden glow.

Your Guide to Building Confidence and Connection Multiple Sclerosis & Intimacy

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The information provided in this guide is not medical advice and is not intended to substitute for the recommendations of your personal physician or other healthcare professional. This guide should not be used to seek help in a medical emergency. If you experience a medical emergency, seek medical treatment in person immediately.

This guide has been peer reviewed.



What is Sexuality?

Sexuality is a key aspect of human life and includes biological gender, gender identity, gender roles and sexual orientation. It is closely linked to eroticism, desire, intimacy, and reproduction.

Sexuality is a fundamental human need. It is expressed through the wish for physical and emotional desire, well-being, and tenderness and seeks to arouse and satisfy.

Sexuality is not restricted to a certain age, but rather, is a life force that stays with us from birth to death.

GOOD TO KNOW

When talking about sexuality, there are three dimensions:

- Relationship
- Desire
- Procreation

Sexuality is more than intercourse. It encompasses emotional closeness, where partners share their deepest thoughts and feelings. It also includes physical affection, such as hugging, kissing, and cuddling, which fosters a sense of connection. Additionally, it involves mutual respect and understanding, creating a safe space for both partners to express their desires and boundaries.

What Happens in the Body During Intimacy?

Fulfilled sexuality requires a complex interaction of various factors. Sensory stimuli, hormones, neural pathways, blood vessels, and the brain, all play an important role.

Sexual arousal and sexual reactions are driven by sensory stimuli such as the sense of touch, sight, smell, taste, and hearing, but also via feelings and thoughts. This stimulates areas of the brain and spinal cord (in the sexual centres). Signals are sent out from these centres (via nerve impulses and hormones) to the genitals, which lead to reactions such as an erection, the swelling of the clitoris, ejaculation, moistness of the vagina, and orgasms.

The brain's sexual centres are found within the central nervous system. A key task of these centres is to regulate desire.

The area for controlling erections is found in the spinal cord, near the bottom of the thoracic spine where it transitions to the lumbar spine (T11-L2). An erection is triggered by physical stimuli such as visual and auditory stimulation, smells, imagination, and desires.

The centre for reflex erections (i.e., via direct stimulation or from a full bladder) is in the sacrum. Current studies are researching the involvement of additional nerves in the sexuality of women.

GOOD TO KNOW

Sex also releases endorphins, oxytocin, and stress-release hormones.



Want to know more about the central nervous system?

<https://mstrust.org.uk/a-z/central-nervous-system-cns>



What Effect Does Multiple Sclerosis (MS) Have on Sexuality?

There are many elements that influence a healthy sex life and sexual health in general from a neurological perspective. A disruption in the sex life of people with MS is relatively common. As such, greater focus is being given to the sexual challenges in individuals with MS.

MS does not necessarily always lead to sexual challenges. However, the reception, processes, and communication of these sensory stimuli can sometimes be disrupted by inflammation and / or sclerosis (scarring of the tissues) in the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord). These sexual challenges can be temporary or permanent and may manifest differently and be experienced differently from one person to the next. Additionally, anxiety and mental health can also influence your sexuality. While these symptoms can often fluctuate, many are manageable with different treatment options.

GOOD TO KNOW

Some medications and their side effects can also lead to sexual dysfunction. It's a good idea to check with your health care provider.

Disruptions can be noticed in the following areas:

- Arousal and desire (libido)
- Erections and swelling of the clitoris (female erection) and penis (male erection)
- Ejaculation
- Lubrication
- Ability to orgasm

The following MS related challenges can also impact a person's sex life:

- Bladder and bowel dysfunction
- Spasms, tremors, and movement limitations
- Pain
- Sensory restrictions (sensitivity)
- Exhaustion
- Fatigue
- Depression
- Emotional stress and fears
- Different feelings of self-worth



Want to know more about sexual health in MS?

<https://livewisems.org/resources/podcasts/improving-your-sexual-health-in-ms>

Self-Assessment – What You Can Do to Empower Your Sexuality

There are many things you can do to take control of your sexual wellbeing. To assist your healthcare provider in offering better support and solutions for you, there is a simple questionnaire that you can complete. This can help identify the challenges that are specific to you and is a great way to start. This way, more customised approaches relevant to your needs can be developed.

The MSISQ-15 (Multiple Sclerosis Intimacy and Sexuality Questionnaire) is a tool designed to help understand how MS affects intimacy and sexual relationships. This can be found on the following page. It consists of 15 questions that explore different aspects of sexual health and intimacy. It is an important step in ensuring regarding your overall well-being and quality of life.



Multiple Sclerosis Intimacy and Sexuality Questionnaire

Questions may be answered by placing a check mark in the circle. There are no right or wrong answers. If you are unsure how to answer a question, please choose the best answer you can.

Over the last six months, the following symptoms have interfered with my sexual activity or satisfaction	never	almost never	occasionally	almost always	always
1. Muscle tightness or spasms in my arms, legs, or body	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. Bladder or urinary symptoms	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. Bowel symptoms	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. Tremors or shaking in my hands or body	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. Pain, burning, or discomfort in my body	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. Feeling that my body is less attractive	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7. Feeling less masculine or feminine due to MS	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
8. Less feeling or numbness in my genitals	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
9. Fear of being rejected sexually because of MS	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
10. Worries about sexually satisfying my partner	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
11. Feeling less confident about my sexuality due to MS	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
12. Lack of sexual interest or desire	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
13. Less intense or pleasurable orgasms or climaxes	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
14. Takes too long to orgasm or climax	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
15. Inadequate vaginal wetness or lubrication (women)/difficulty getting or keeping a satisfactory erection (men)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Some Next Steps

Once you have completed the MSISQ-15 survey, you can then use this information to share with your healthcare provider. If you are noticing changes in your sexual life and would like to discuss this further, your MS team will want to talk to you about this. You may be asked about this routinely as it is a common issue.

Your MS Nurse, Nurse Practitioner, or Neurologist may want to discuss:

- Your sexual history
- If your current symptoms were prior to, or after the onset of MS
- For women, if you are pre, peri or post-menopausal? If peri or post-menopausal, you could be referred to a gynaecological specialist first.
- Review your current medications – as they could have potential sexual side effects
- If you are getting enough sleep or are fatigued
- Other health conditions that could change your sexual function
- Possible blood tests being required
- Screening for low mood and depression
- A sexologist referral
- A psychology referral



Online Resources

Scan a QR code to learn more.



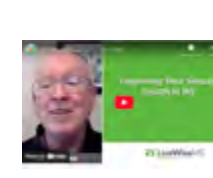
Sex and MS – A guide for men
MS Trust UK



Sexuality and MS – A guide for women
MS Trust UK



beducated
Sex education platform with 150+ courses
in adult sex education.



LiveWiseMS.org
video with Dr. Fred Foley
'improving your sexual health in MS'



Let's talk about Sex and MS
Dr. Fred Foley podcast



Aaron Boster
YouTube channel.



MS Australia
msaustralia.org.au



MS Society of New Zealand
msnz.org.nz



Building Confidence and Connection

As you have reached the end of this booklet, we hope you feel more informed and empowered about managing the impact of MS on your intimacy and sexual health. This journey is unique to each individual and understanding the challenges and opportunities that come with MS, is a crucial step towards maintaining a fulfilling and intimate life. Remember you are not alone in this journey and there are many resources and support systems available to help you navigate these aspects of your life.

Moving forward, consider discussing any concerns or questions with your health care provider. They can offer personalised advice and treatment options tailored to your needs. Additionally, exploring support groups or counselling can provide a safe space to share experiences and learn from others who are on a similar path. Communication with your partner is also key. Being open about your feelings and needs can strengthen your relationship and foster a deeper connection, which can in turn lead to better sexual wellbeing.

Finally, take proactive steps to enhance your well-being. Regular exercise, a balanced diet, and mindfulness practises can help improve your overall health and positively impact your sexual health. Stay informed about the latest research and treatments for MS and don't hesitate to seek help when needed. Your journey with MS is a continuous process of learning and adapting. With the right support and resources, you can lead a fulfilling and intimate life.

Australia

PO Box 375
Box Hill, VIC 3128
1800 880 851

www.hollister.com.au

New Zealand

PO Box 107097
Auckland Airport, Auckland 2150
0800 678 669

www.hollister.co.nz

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Contraindications, Warnings, Precautions, and Instructions.