

Sexuality and Heart Disease



calgary health region

Additional Reading

The following book is available in the hospital libraries at the Rockyview General Hospital, Foothills Hospital and Peter Lougheed Centre:

Heartmates: A Survival Guide For The Cardiac Spouse

Rhoda F. Levin **WG 113 L665 1987**



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Warning Signs and Symptoms

If you experience any of the following signs and symptoms during or after intercourse you should notify your doctor:

- angina, chest pain, a feeling of pressure or discomfort in the chest, or shortness of breath during sexual activity, especially if not relieved by Nitroglycerin.
- feeling very tired and fatigued the day following sexual activity
- unable to catch your breath or a fast heart rate for more than 15 minutes after intercourse
- can't sleep or sleep disturbance after intercourse
- unable to obtain relief from shortness of breath after intercourse
- palpitations for more than 15 minutes after sexual activity
- extreme anxiety before, during or after intercourse

We encourage you to talk to your doctor or a member of the health care team with any special problems. Understand that getting in touch again with your body, starting slowly, and talking openly to your partner can help you return to a satisfying sex life.

This material is designed for information purposes only. It should not be used in place of medical advice, instruction and/or treatment. If you have specific questions, please consult your doctor or appropriate health care professional.

Sexuality and Heart Disease

A person recovering from a heart attack, heart disease or heart surgery may have many questions about their sex life. Many fear they will not be able to carry on a sexual relationship with their partner or that their sex life is over. While none of this is true, these questions are often not thought about or discussed while in hospital. It is important that you talk about these concerns with a member of the health care team and **with** your partner. You can decrease your anxiety and be reassured by talking openly about your feelings.

This booklet will provide you with information about how sexual relations affect the heart and body. You will also be given some general guidelines for resuming sexual activity and getting in touch with your feelings. Be sure to share this information with your partner and don't be afraid to ask questions.

Myths About Sex And Your Heart

Many myths surround sex and heart disease. The most common one is that sexual intercourse is harmful to the heart and can lead to a heart attack. By following some general guidelines, there is little chance that having sex will lead to a heart attack. However, if you have any concerns you should speak with your doctor.

Another myth is that heart disease decreases the sex drive and affects your ability to have sex. It is true that fatigue, depression, and some medications can affect your sex drive and performance. However, most of these problems can be treated and often improve over time. Although it takes time to recover, most people find that the same forms of lovemaking that were pleasing before their cardiac event are still rewarding.

Remember: *Talk about your concerns with a member of the health care team and with your partner. Don't be afraid to ask questions.*

Your Emotions

It is normal for people with heart disease AND their partners to feel depressed, frightened and anxious, especially after a heart attack or heart surgery. These emotions can decrease sexual desire and may affect sexual performance. These feelings are a normal part of the recovery process and will decrease as you begin to feel better. If these feelings of depression are ongoing, you should talk to your doctor.

When to avoid sexual intercourse:

- if you are tired
- if the room temperature is either too hot or too cold. Hot or cold settings may increase your heart rate and the work of your heart.
- after a hot bath or shower. Warm water causes the blood vessels to become bigger (dilate) and the heart has to pump faster.
- if you have just eaten a meal. After eating, more blood flows to the stomach to digest food. This leaves less blood for increased heart activity required for sex. Wait three (3) hours.
- if you have just consumed alcohol. Alcohol causes your heart to beat faster and can interfere with sexual functioning. Wait three (3) hours.
- if you are feeling stressed or angry or if you are feeling anxious with your partner
- if you are going to engage in some form of strenuous activity after intercourse
- if you have just smoked or drank a beverage containing caffeine. Cigarette smoking and caffeine make your heart work harder and beat faster. It is generally recommended that all heart patients do not smoke and decrease their intake of caffeine. If you must use them, wait two (2) hours before intercourse.
- if you experience angina which is not relieved by nitroglycerin or rest

Remember: *it's okay if you have times when you don't feel like having sex. Be sure not to blame your illness. Everyone experiences these feelings and they are normal.*

- Although the passive position is usually the best, other suggestions include

1. side/lying, front-to-back (refer to Figure 3)



Figure 3: Side/Lying, Front-to-Back

2. sitting, face-to-face.

The chair should be armless and low enough so that both partners' feet touch the floor. (refer to Figure 4)

- Try to achieve comfortable and satisfying positions. Do not make major changes in sexual positions if either partner is tired or anxious.
- You will need to find the one position that works best for you because everyone has different preferences.
- Your doctor will tell you if any position should be avoided.



Figure 4:
Sitting,
Face-to-Face

Slowly increasing your sexual activity will help you and your partner have confidence in your ability and take away some of the fear you may be experiencing. Hugging and kissing and talking about your feelings are good ways to get back in touch with your partner. Take your time in rebuilding your sex life. This may mean just talking about your sexual feelings and/or touching each other. If acceptable, masturbation and sexual foreplay are good ways to gradually work up to intercourse.

Remember: *Love and communication with each other can be expressed in many ways aside from sex.*

Some medications may decrease your desire for sex or may interfere with your sexual response. The dose or type of medication can be changed to overcome these problems. If you have concerns about this, talk to your doctor.

The Physical Side of Sex

Sexual activity increases the workload of the heart. The heart rate increases, breathing increases, body temperature rises and blood pressure goes up during sexual intercourse.

You may wonder how you will know when you are physically ready to assume sexual intercourse. **A good guideline is being able to climb 2 flights of stairs without having any shortness of breath, chest pain or chest discomfort.** By following the guidelines in this booklet, you should be able to resume sexual activity as soon as you feel ready to do so. However, you should check with your doctor if you have any questions.

Your doctor may recommend a specific time period when you should avoid sex. Ask your doctor if this applies to you.

General Guidelines For Resuming Sexual Activity

When Engaging in Sexual Intercourse

- be relaxed! Make sure you talk to your partner about both your physical and emotional needs. Avoid interruptions. Take the phone off the hook. Time, privacy, and comfort are helpful to create a relaxing atmosphere.
- choose a time when you will be well rested; e.g. in the morning after a good night's sleep or in the afternoon after a nap.
- touching is a good way to work up to sexual intercourse. Sexual foreplay helps you to get in the mood for sex. It also allows your heart rate and blood pressure to rise slowly and gradually.
- try a position that is comfortable and conserves energy. (Refer to section on "Positioning".)
- only have sexual relations with your partner. Having other partners may increase anxiety and guilt (which can raise your heart rate and blood pressure).
- rest for at least 20 minutes following intercourse
- keep your nitroglycerin handy in case you develop angina, chest discomfort or shortness of breath during intercourse. Take your nitroglycerin as instructed if this happens and rest for a while before continuing. **Note:** *If you are recovering from cardiac surgery you should tell your doctor if you experience any angina or chest pain during intercourse.*
- if sexual intercourse has brought on angina, chest pain, chest discomfort or shortness of breath in the past, try taking the nitroglycerin before you engage in sex.

Positioning

- It is best to choose positions which do not require you to support your upper body with your arms or support your partner's weight for a long period of time. **This is especially important if you are recovering from cardiac surgery.**
- It is recommended that the heart patient become the passive partner during intercourse. (This may be the male or female assuming the passive role.)
- In top/bottom positioning, the bottom position is the passive position. (Refer to Figure 1)

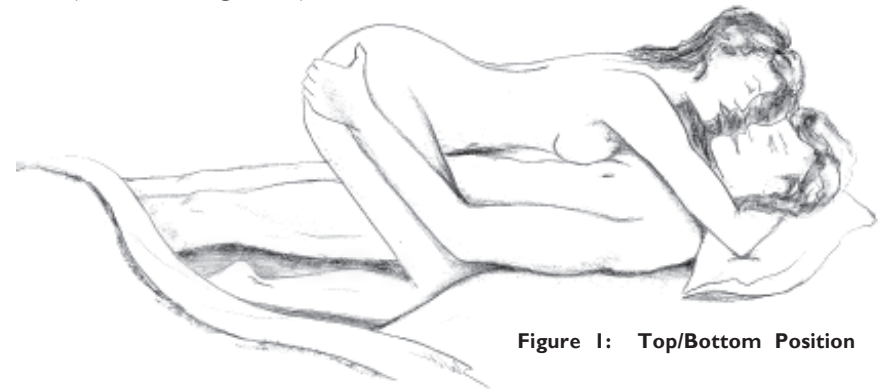


Figure 1: Top/Bottom Position

Note: In this picture, the male is shown as the heart patient. If the woman is the heart patient, she should take the bottom position.

- Side/lying, face-to-face positions also help to conserve energy and decrease the work of the heart during intercourse. (Refer to Figure2)

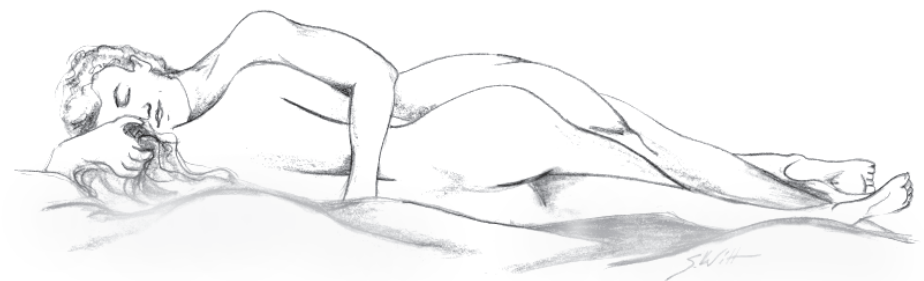


Figure 2: Side/Lying, Face-to-Face