



# Sexual Dysfunction and **DIABETES** in Women

## What is sexual dysfunction in women?

When sex with a partner is not pleasurable for a woman with diabetes, sexual dysfunction is most likely the cause. There are many different factors involved in the sexual well-being of women with diabetes... many stresses that could interfere with a satisfying experience. Uncontrolled blood sugar levels can lead to complications that effect one's sex life and cause sexual dysfunctions. Some of the major problems include:

### Physical problems

These are problems that relate to the sexual act itself such as reduced sex drive, reduced pleasure from sex, lack of vaginal lubrication, lack of pleasurable sensations, reduced ability to experience an orgasm, or painful sex.

### Inconvenience

Diabetes may lead to other difficulties such as excessive tiredness, necessity for injections, placement of an insulin pump and/or a continuous glucose monitor, the effects of abnormally high or low blood glucose levels and the time involved in managing diabetes.

### Psychological problems

Diabetes may lead to psychological effects such as loss of a positive self-image, loss of self-esteem, feelings of unattractiveness: concern about weight gain, negative body image; stress of dealing with a chronic disease: depression, anxiety, worry; or loneliness and isolation. All of these may affect a woman's sexual well-being.

There is some evidence that these problems may be more common in older women with diabetes, but it is not known whether these findings are related directly to diabetes. Those women who require more support as a result of their diabetes may find that this affects their ability to communicate with a partner.

Many older women may no longer have a sexual partner and find that their diabetes adds to feelings of loneliness or isolation.

Women—younger women in particular—may worry about the effects of diabetes on physical appearance. Weight gain can be associated with insulin therapy. This problem can be eased by adopting healthy eating patterns and by engaging in a physically active lifestyle.

### Relationship worries

A woman's support system and ability to communicate with her partner will play an important role in her sexual well-being.

### General health concerns

Worries about pregnancy and contraception, frequent urinary tract infections or vaginal yeast infections, other health-related illnesses, diabetes complications, and side effects of medications may also affect a woman's sexual health.

Hypoglycemia can have a disastrous effect on the intimate moment. Checking your blood glucose levels prior to sexual activity can prevent a low blood glucose reaction. Limit your alcohol intake as this could increase your risk of low blood glucose; consider the time of the month and how your blood glucose is affected. Menopause may cause unexpected drops in blood glucose—so be prepared. Consider the effect of an earlier exercise workout on your blood glucose; always have a snack nearby.

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**Figure 1** Self-image problems such as excess weight and other psychological issues such as depression, anxiety and worry can affect women's sexual well-being.

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**Figure 2** Concerns about the effect of diabetes on fertility or worries about the possibility of diabetes developing in offspring are issues that cause concern and should be discussed with a health care professional.

## Symptoms

Women with diabetes experience a higher rate of sexual problems than women without diabetes because the tissue and nerve supply of a woman's sexual organs may be affected by high blood glucose levels in much the same way a man's sexual organs are affected.

Lubrication of a woman's sexual organs occurs during the arousal phase of the sexual response cycle. This is the same phase that leads to erections in men. The reduction in lubrication—together with reduced sensation in the vaginal area—may lead to painful intercourse, a reduced likelihood of achieving an orgasm and, consequently, a reduced sex drive.

Women with diabetes may experience decreased sexual desire, inability to have orgasms, and decreased sexual satisfaction. As a result, sexual activity may be reduced, which may impact a woman's relationship with her partner. Unfortunately, many women do not realize that this may be a complication of diabetes and is treatable. If this is your experience, speak with your health care professional.

Women who *accept* their diagnosis, and those who are diagnosed early in life, appear to be less likely to develop sexual problems. This may be why women with Type 2 diabetes experience sexual problems more frequently, as developing diabetes at a young age may result in dealing with many of these psychological issues before entering into a sexual relationship.

## Treatments Available

### Lubricants

In those women who suffer from a lack of lubrication or from painful sexual intercourse, consider using a vaginal lubricant as a part of your sexual foreplay.

### Manual Aids

For others who suffer from lack of vaginal sensation or a reduction in the ability to experience an orgasm, the use of manual aids — masturbation, oral-genital stimulation and manual stimulation of the clitoris — may be helpful. Allow plenty of time for touching, caressing, and romancing. Discuss with your partner different ways to be intimate and share those things that give you pleasure.

### Oral Medications

Use of the male impotence pill, Viagra (sildenafil), has been investigated and some data suggests that it may be helpful to women who suffer with lubrication and vaginal sensitivity problems; or if you are taking a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) such as Prozac, Paxil or Zoloft for depression these medications may affect your libido; talk to your healthcare professional about your options.

Women who do not have adequate levels of circulating estrogen—such as in the post-menopause period—may find hormone replacement therapy to be helpful, but consideration of cardiac risk is important.

## Other Sexual Health Concerns

Diabetes may affect the sexual health of women in many other ways. For example:

- Thrush, cystitis and genito-urinary infection are more common in those with diabetes and may significantly interfere with sexual activity.
- Chronic complications of diabetes (eye, kidney, nerve and blood supply problems) could have negative effects.
- Medication can also affect sexual activity. The use of antibiotics to treat urinary tract infection, for example, increases the susceptibility to vaginal thrush. Antibiotics may also affect the action of the contraceptive pill.
- Women with diabetes have a more restricted choice of contraception since the oral contraceptive pill carries a slightly increased risk of blood clots. The use of an IUD can increase the risk of womb infection.

## Pregnancy

Pregnancy remains a significant worry for many young women with diabetes, and this can lead to sexual and relationship difficulties. Concerns about the effect of diabetes on fertility, concern about the health of the fetus, and worries about the possibility of diabetes developing in offspring are issues that should be discussed with your healthcare professional. The risks to baby and mother and the worries of sexually active women can be reduced with adequate pre-pregnancy counseling and pre-pregnancy and early pregnancy care.

## Top tips to help manage sexual dysfunction

Get help. Sexual health is important to your physical and psychological well-being. There are treatments available. Talk with your healthcare professional.

- Control your blood glucose as effectively as possible.
- Talk with your partner and work together to improve your communication.
- If it is clear that there is a strong psychological connection to the problem, then seeing a psychosexual therapist can be very rewarding. Ask your healthcare professional for assistance in finding one in your area.
- Make sure that your blood pressure and cholesterol are managed effectively.
- Do not smoke.

### For more information about diabetes

contact DRWF's helpline at 800-941-4635, or logon to our website at [www.diabeteswellness.net](http://www.diabeteswellness.net).

Other brochures available: *Your Feet and Diabetes* • *What is Diabetes?*

*Illness and Diabetes* • *Injections* • *Periodontal Disease and Diabetes* *Prediabetes* • *Erectile Dysfunction*

*The Facts About Diabetic Retinopathy* • *Diabetes and Exercise*



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Helpline Questions 1-800-941-4635 • Administrative offices 202-298-9211

### ***An Organization for People Who Live with Diabetes Every Day.***

The mission of **Diabetes Research & Wellness Foundation** (DRWF) is to help find the cure for diabetes, and until that goal is achieved, to provide the care and self-management skills needed to combat the life-threatening complications of this terrible disease.

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