

Understanding Being Close



MOUNT SINAI - NATIONAL JEWISH HEALTH

Respiratory Institute



Icahn School
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Dealing with Chronic Lung Disease

A loving relationship with your partner can help you deal with your chronic lung disease and the emotions that come with it. Yet a person with a chronic lung disease may have problems that interfere with being close.

If you have a chronic lung disease, or a chronic disease, this booklet is for you. It is also for your partner — the person who shares your life and the effects of your illness with you. It is normal for you to have questions. It is important to have your questions answered so that you and your partner can be happy with your sexuality.

Some people have few sexual problems even with severe lung disease. Others have more serious concerns. Whatever your degree of disability or your age, this booklet is designed to help you. We hope you will find it useful, and will take time to share it with your partner.



What Are Some Common Feelings?

It is hard to feel motivated for sexual activity when you feel tired, depressed, unattractive, tense or fearful. The changes that occur with chronic lung disease often leave people with at least one of these feelings. It is important for you and your partner to understand these changes and to learn how to cope with the feelings that result.

Depression, sadness, anger and grief are normal responses to the losses that often come with any chronic illness. You may feel that your life is “out of control” or that you are only “half the person” you were before. You may feel you are not able to function at home and work as you did before. Some of the fun activities you enjoyed may not be possible anymore. You may even notice family behaviors toward you have changed. They may be overprotective or distant.

What Are Some Common Feelings?



Holding and touching each other, as well as enjoying time together are also important parts of loving and being loved.

Changes in how you look can make you feel that you have lost your familiar body. Increased or decreased weight, stooped shoulders or bad breath from chronic infections often make you feel less attractive to your sexual partner.

Fear is a common emotion you or your partner may have. You or your partner may worry that kissing or sexual activity will be suffocating. This may lead to avoiding sexual activity.

These are all common feelings. Dealing with these feelings by talking with someone you trust can help you accept these losses and move on. Talking openly about these feelings with your partner can be very helpful. Many times just clearing the air can pave the way to a more relaxed time together. Knowing that shortness of breath during sexual activity, like any exercise, is to be expected can help some of the fear you both may have.

It is also important to realize that being sexual means more than just having sexual intercourse. Holding and touching each other, as well as enjoying time together are also important parts of loving and being loved.



What Will Help You and Your Partner Communicate?

Talking with your partner is an important part of dealing with how your chronic lung disease may affect your sexual relationship. It is common for people to find this difficult.

There are several things you can do to make it easier:

- First of all, start talking. Once you begin to talk, you may discover that it is easier to talk each time. A good way to start may be asking your partner to read this booklet. Try to find a time to talk that will be free of distractions such as the television, telephone or children. If you or your partner still have trouble talking about your sexual relationship, your doctor or nurse may be able to help or refer you to someone who can.
- Once you are talking, you may find it helpful to plan sex for the time of day when you feel your best. This may be different from your usual pattern.

What Will Help You and Your Partner Communicate?

- Talk about what gives you pleasure, both physical and emotional. Also talk about what gives you discomfort. Only you know what gives you pleasure or discomfort. Talk with your partner about what may make your breathing worse. Talk about what positions are more comfortable for you. Some of these positions will be discussed and illustrated in later sections of this booklet.



Talk about what gives you pleasure, both physical and emotional. Also talk about what gives you discomfort.



How Your Body Changes as You Get Older

You and your partner should be aware of the normal changes in sexual function that occur as you get older.

If you are a man, you may notice that it takes longer to achieve an erection. Your erection may not be as hard as it used to be. Your partner may want to provide more caressing. The time between ejaculation and being able to achieve another erection may be longer. Talk with your health care provider if erectile dysfunction is an issue. There are treatments available.

If you are a woman, you may also need more caressing. Your vaginal lubrication may decrease with age. An artificial, water-soluble lubricant will help avoid irritation. A petroleum-based lubricant is not recommended. Your vaginal wall may also become thinner. Your health care provider may recommend hormone replacement therapy or use of estrogen vaginal cream.



Exercise Can Help Your Sexual Activity

You know that daily walking, swimming or other exercise will improve your strength and endurance.

Exercise can also improve your mental alertness, self-esteem and your sex life. Remember that most people have an increase in breathing and heart rate during exercise. This is normal and occurs during sexual intercourse also. The amount of energy required for sexual intercourse is similar to climbing stairs or taking a fast walk. Talk with your doctor about an exercise program.



How Can You Help Shortness of Breath During Sexual Activity?

You may have learned ways to help your shortness of breath during daily activity.

There are also ways to help your shortness of breath during sexual activity:

- Plan sexual activity when you are feeling good. Often people feel fresh and rested during the late morning or early afternoon.
- As you would during any type of exercise, pace yourself. Increase your activity slowly and relax.
- If you use an inhaled medicine before exercise, ask your doctor about also using the inhaled medicine before sexual activity.
- Plan sexual activity when your long acting medicine is at its peak.
- If you increase your oxygen flow during exercise, ask your doctor about also increasing your oxygen flow during sexual activity. If you use a nasal cannula try placing the oxygen tubing and cannula

How Can You Help Shortness of Breath During Sexual Activity?



As you would during any type of exercise, pace yourself. Increase your activity slowly and relax.

around your head and tightening it at the back for greater comfort. Be creative in taping the tubing in place. Use tubing extensions to increase your mobility during sexual activity.

- Wait two to three hours after a large meal. A large meal may increase your shortness of breath and make sexual activity difficult.
- Keep the room cool, yet comfortable.
- Remove heavy blankets from the bed.
- Rest and use your breathing exercises if you become short of breath or feel you are suffocating. Try not to hold your breath. You may also want to try a new position.
- Make pleasure for you and your partner your goal.
- Use a fan nearby for better airflow across your face.



Less Strenuous Positions for Sexual Intercourse

Using less strenuous positions for sexual intercourse can help the shortness of breath you may feel with sexual activity. Think of these general ideas when planning less strenuous positions.

- Plan ahead and talk with your partner about exploring new sexual positions. Talk and try to understand how your partner feels about trying new positions.
- Use pillows to provide comfortable support. You will breathe better with your head and chest elevated.
- Avoid positions that require you to support your body on your arms or add pressure on your stomach.
- The partner without lung disease should do most of the moving. Move in a slow rhythmic manner.
- If your partner lies on top, make sure they are not lying directly on your chest or stomach.

Less Strenuous Positions for Sexual Intercourse



The side position with partners facing each other allows for a free breathing for both partners. Oxygen can easily be worn with this position.



Both partners lie on their side. The man enters from behind. The woman can have a pillow between her knees if desired.



The man lies on his back. He may use pillows for support. The woman can support her own body weight on her elbows and/ or knees. The woman needs to provide most of the energy.



The woman lies on her back supported by pillows. This is also a position that easily allows for use of oxygen.

These diagrams are a starting point. Make whatever changes you need in the positions to help you breathe better. You also can change the positions according to strength, body weight and degree of comfort.

Explore sexual activity that may satisfy you and your partner, even if intercourse is not involved. Touching, caressing and the use of a vibrator may be the best sexual activity at times. Oral sex or masturbation may also substitute for sexual intercourse for some people.



Just Being Together

Enjoy relaxing and spending time together. Just being physically close to your partner often results in loving feelings. These can range from handholding, hugging, touching and caressing. These are expressions of caring — and can sometimes be more meaningful than sexual intercourse itself.

Many couples are surprised to find they have a closer relationship because of the chronic lung disease. They communicate more, and they may feel a sense of warmth and security from increased dependency on a partner.



Remember

Having a chronic lung disease does not mean your sex life or the closeness and enjoyment that it brings must come to an end. It may require some changes and adjustments. Talking with your partner about your chronic lung disease and the way you express your sexuality is very important.

Remember that your chronic lung disease does not need to stand in the way of your being sexual. Feel free to talk with your doctor or nurse about any sexual concerns you or your partner may have.

If they are not able to help you, they may be able to refer you to health professionals who help people with similar concerns.

Notes

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The Mount Sinai – National Jewish Health Respiratory Institute was formed by the nation’s leading respiratory hospital National Jewish Health, based in Denver, and top ranked academic medical center the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York City.

Combining the strengths of both organizations into an integrated Respiratory Institute brings together leading expertise in diagnosing and treating all forms of respiratory illness and lung disease, including asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), interstitial lung disease (ILD) and bronchiectasis. The Respiratory Institute is based in New York City on the campus of Mount Sinai.

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