



Patient & Family Guide
2020

Pain and Sexual Activity

Pain Self-Management Program



www.nshealth.ca

Pain and Sexual Activity

Sexual activity (sex) and intimacy are an important part of relationships for many people.

- When you have trouble taking part in sexual activity or intimacy in the way you are used to, it may cause:
 - › Distress
 - › Shame
 - › Relationship stress
 - › Anxiety
 - › Frustration
- Intimacy involves feeling emotionally close and connected to another person. Intimate relationships often involve mutual trust, caring, and acceptance. Some examples of being intimate include holding hands, kissing, and touching. Intimacy is also used to refer to sexual experiences, but intimacy does not have to be sexual.
- People have many different beliefs about what sex and intimacy should be. These beliefs may come from friends, family members, media, religious communities, partners, and past experiences.

- Sometimes, the ideas or beliefs that you have about sex and intimacy work well with your relationships, physical health, and body. Other times, your ideas may make it hard to enjoy sexual or intimate experiences.
- This can happen whenever there is a change in your body, like chronic pain. Sometimes these changes may cause you to avoid sexual or intimate activities completely.
- It can help to learn new ways of experiencing sex and intimacy. By exploring sex in a new, open way, you may find that you can enjoy very satisfying experiences — maybe even more satisfying than before.

How does chronic pain affect sexual activity and intimacy?

- People with chronic pain often experience more pain when they:
 - › do an activity over and over.
 - › do an activity for a long time.
 - › move in certain ways.
 - › stay in certain positions.
 - › are touched in certain ways.

All of these may be involved in sexual and intimate activities.

- We may not think of sex as exercise, but it is a physical activity.
- The things you do to help with movement can also help you find comfortable ways to enjoy sex, such as:
 - › paying attention to the way you move your body
 - › pacing activities
- Sex is not only physical. It also involves our focus and attention.
- The brain interprets pain as a signal of a threat or an urgent problem. Imagine being sexual and hearing a smoke alarm go off, or your child screaming down the hall – would this take you out of the moment? Of course!
- It is important that threats interrupt our sexual response system when there is a crisis or an emergency. Chronic pain is no longer a signal of an immediate threat or crisis, but it can still be distracting and take you out of the moment.
- It may help to actively focus your attention on enjoyable sexual aspects of the moment, such as your partner or how your body is feeling.

How can I focus more on the moment?

Relaxation strategies can help calm the nervous system before sex. These include:

- **Deep breathing**
- **Progressive muscle relaxation**
- **Visual imagery** is a powerful tool to use during sexual activity. Using imagination or fantasy can help your mind to focus on sexual thoughts or images before and/or during sex.
- **Mindfulness** strategies can help you focus on the present moment in an open, accepting way. There are many mindfulness resources available, including books, websites, apps, and YouTube videos.
- **Sensate focus** involves noticing touch in an exploring, open, non-judgmental way, without focusing on a specific goal or outcome. For more information, search “sensate focus” online.

How do I pace my sexual activity?

- If you feel you cannot have sexual experiences in the way you are used to, or that sex will cause a lot of pain, you may simply avoid it.
- You may also avoid other forms of intimacy, such as holding hands, kissing, or touching, if you worry that they may lead to sex or to disappointing your partner.
- Or you may still engage in sex in the same way as before, without any changes, and risk a flare-up of pain from over-doing it.
- Both of these approaches can get in the way of having pleasurable and enjoyable experiences.
- Instead of avoiding all sexual or intimate activity, or over-doing it, it may help to practice pacing. Pacing can help you manage your pain levels and get the most pleasure or enjoyment out of sex that you can. This may include:
 - › Taking breaks
 - › Changing between active and more relaxing activities
 - › Switching positions

- › Changing between different types of activities (like focusing on one partner and then the other, adding self-stimulation (masturbation) to partnered activity, giving each other massages). Get creative!

“Sex shouldn’t be this much work”

You may feel frustrated thinking so much about an experience that you probably did not have to think much about before.

But **working at sex may actually lead to better sexual experiences**. People who recognize that good sex takes work tend to have better sexual experiences than those who think sex should “just work” with little effort or planning. This may be even more important when facing a change in your sexuality, like chronic pain.

“But that’s not what sex looks like”

You may feel unsure about trying new ways of being sexual — this is normal. Over time, we develop **sexual scripts** (ideas about how we think things “should go” when it comes to sex).

- You may find yourself in a routine.

- You may have ideas about what sexuality looks like from movies or other messages or experiences. Your brain naturally turns these ideas into rules on how we think things must go. Any change from this may be seen as a “failure.”

There are many ways to be sexual or intimate.

People who are more **flexible** in their sexual scripts (do not have strict rules about how things “should go”) have better sexual experiences. This is not just for people with pain!

Why is it hard to be flexible about sex?

- Cultural messages suggest that a sexual experience is only a “success” if it involves a certain sexual activity (like sexual intercourse) or bodily event (like an erection or orgasm).
- People enjoy sexual activity for many reasons, such as:
 - › Feeling wanted/desired
 - › Being touched
 - › Relieving stress
 - › Feeling pleasure or arousal
 - › Giving their partner pleasure
 - › Being physically close to their partner
 - › Experiencing intimacy
 - › Feeling cared for
 - › And more

Each person's experience is unique.

- It can help to talk with your partner about what is most important to each of you.

Imagine what it would be like if the goal of sexual activity was fun, enjoyment, pleasure, spending time together, or intimacy.

Would anything look different?

What possibilities would this create?

Self-talk and communication

- These ideas may be new and different from your past views on sex or intimacy.
- Think about what your mind is telling you (self-talk) about sex.
 - › Are there any difficult thoughts?
 - › Do you hear any **all or nothing thinking** about what sex should look like?
 - › Do you think you know your partner's thoughts (**mind reading**)?
 - › Are you **predicting** how your partner may react to these ideas?

- › Or maybe your mind is **catastrophizing** (assuming the worst) about the future of your relationship, or whether you will have a relationship in the future?
- Becoming aware of your self-talk can help you to move forward. Try to notice and challenge your negative thoughts or think of other options.
- To change your approach to sexual activity, you will need to talk with your current and/or future partners. This may be hard because most people are not used to talking about sex and you may be afraid of a negative reaction.
- Practicing **assertive communication skills** can help you share your needs and experiences.
- Remember to be patient — most people have had habits and ideas about sex for a long time. Change and openness take time.

Resources

- It may help to talk with a health care provider if you have any concerns about sexual activity. Doctors, pharmacists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, psychologists, counsellors, and other health care providers can often suggest ways to make sex/intimacy more comfortable.
- **If you have concerns about the side effects of medications, tell your health care provider.**

Halifax resources

- **Halifax Sexual Health Centre:** provides nonjudgmental and inclusive sexual and reproductive health services and resources
 - › 7071 Bayers Road, Suite 302 (previously located on Quinpool Road)
 - › <http://hshc.ca>
 - › Phone: 902-455-9656
- **Venus Envy:** a welcoming bookstore and sex shop with knowledgeable staff
 - › 1598 Barrington Street
 - › <https://venusenvy.ca>
 - › Phone: 902-422-0004

Nova Scotia resources

- **Association of Psychologists of Nova Scotia:** private practice psychologists specializing in sexual health:
 - › <https://apns.ca/find-a-psychologist/>
 - › Search areas of practice (like sexual issues, pain management) and contact clinicians to ask about their expertise in sex and/or couples therapy for people with chronic pain.

Books and websites

Sexuality and pain

Books:

- “The Ultimate Guide to Sex and Disability: For all of us who live with disabilities, chronic pain & illness”
 - › Miriam Kaufman, Cory Silverberg, and Fran Odette (2007)

Websites:

- Search “sexuality and pain” or “sex and disability.”
- Visit Venus Envy (see page 10) for library and staff recommendations.

Vulvar pain

Books:

- “When Sex Hurts: A Woman’s Guide to Banishing Sexual Pain”
 - › Andrew Goldstein, Caroline Pukall, and Irwin Goldstein (2011)

Websites:

- National Vulvodynia Association
 - › www.nva.org/

Sexuality

Books:

- “Understanding Human Sexuality, Sixth Canadian Edition”
 - › Janet Shibley Hyde, John D. DeLamater, and E. Sandra Byers (2015)
- “Human Sexuality: A Contemporary Introduction, Third Edition”
 - › edited by Caroline F. Pukall (2020)
- “When Your Sex Drives Don’t Match: Discover Your Libido Types to Create a Mutually Satisfying Sex Life”
 - › Sandra Pertot (2007)
- “The Honeymoon Effect: The Science of Creating Heaven on Earth”
 - › Bruce H. Lipton (2014)

For women and their partners:

Books:

- “Come as You Are: The Surprising New Science That Will Transform Your Sex Life”
 - › Emily Nagoski (2015)
- “Better Sex Through Mindfulness: How Women Can Cultivate Desire”
 - › Lori A. Brotto (2018)

For men and their partners:

Books:

- “The New Male Sexuality: The Truth About Men, Sex, and Pleasure, Revised Edition”
 - › Bernie Zilbergeld (1999)
- “Not Always in the Mood: The New Science of Men, Sex, and Relationships”
 - › Sarah Hunter Murray (2019)

Note: Many of these books focus on the experiences of cisgender people (sex assigned at birth matches gender identity) and heterosexuals. But many of the ideas are useful. Try reading online reviews to find out if these books may be helpful to you.

How can I use what I learned?

Take a few minutes to write 1 or 2 things you learned, and how you might use them.

Looking for more health information?

Find this pamphlet and all our patient resources here: <http://library.nshealth.ca/PatientGuides>

Contact your local public library for books, videos, magazines, and other resources.

For more information, go to <http://library.novascotia.ca>

Connect with a registered nurse in Nova Scotia any time: call 811 or visit <https://811.novascotia.ca>

Learn about other programs and services in your community: call 211 or visit <http://ns.211.ca>

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The information in this pamphlet is to be updated every 3 years or as needed.