

SEXUAL ACTIVITY AFTER HYSTERECTOMY

It is commonly thought that hysterectomy may result in sexual difficulties. There is little, if any, medical evidence to support this. There are no mechanical or physiological reasons why hysterectomy should disrupt the sexual response. In fact, there may even be a significant improvement in sexual activity following hysterectomy, both in terms of enjoyment and frequency of intercourse. For many women, the fear of pregnancy is gone resulting in a new lease of life, while others, who have had prolonged or heavy bleeding, are freed from this debilitation and may feel rejuvenated following surgery.

Problems that may be experienced following hysterectomy are:

- **Loss of sexual drive (libido)**
- **Vaginal dryness**
- **Painful intercourse**

Some or all of these may occur, particularly if the ovaries are removed.

Helpful suggestions to overcome these problems:

- Initially you may feel that your sexual response has changed, but this is rarely the case. Often your mind takes longer to be ready for sex than your body, following surgery.
- Both you and your partner may be anxious at first on resumption of sexual intercourse, therefore the use of a lubricant (KY jelly) may help to overcome the vaginal dryness.
- Vaginal dryness may also be due to hormone deficiency if the ovaries are removed. Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) will be of benefit in these cases. At your convenience, you can discuss this with your doctor.
- Deep penetration may cause discomfort during intercourse in the early months after surgery. This can be overcome by a) altering positions or b) altering the angle of penetration.
- Allow adequate time for the stitches in the vagina to heal, usually about six weeks.

Initially, the vagina may seem somewhat shortened, but return to sexual intercourse will gradually stretch the vaginal tissues. This may be more noticeable following a vaginal hysterectomy, when a repair involving the front and back walls of the vagina was also performed.

Sexual difficulties for some women may be caused by psychological changes:

- Hysterectomy results in irreversible sterility. This may be a problem for women whose fertility is an important part of their sexual identity. They need to have their confidence restored in their sexuality.

- Some women are concerned that they may lose their femininity after the operation. There is no basis for this.
- Some partners/spouses may react negatively to the operation. He may fear that his partner is altered by the surgery, or physically weakened, neither of which are true.

In general, hysterectomy should have no adverse effects on your sexuality provided you are fully informed of the effects of surgery and psychologically prepared for the results. On the contrary, hysterectomy has marked beneficial effects on health and pelvic symptoms, often leading to enhancement of women's sexual lives.

It is important for both you and your partner to get the appropriate information pre-operatively, and to eliminate any myths or misconceptions about the surgery and its effects. Make sure you talk to your doctor. If you have any questions, concerns or anxieties about your surgery or its effects, the staff looking after you will be delighted to help you. So, please don't be afraid to ask.

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