

SEXUAL ACTIVITY AND HEART DISEASE

Some people, for a variety of reasons, may not resume sexual activity straight away and other ways of expressing their feelings should be considered. Advise caution, not timidity.

After the shock of being diagnosed with heart disease and the natural fear of losing each other, a couple may find that their relationship is made stronger by resuming their sex life.

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Question	Answer
Does sexual intercourse pose any risk for people with heart disease and with Stable Angina or a past history of a myocardial infarction?	A healthy sex life is part of returning to a normal life after a cardiac event and can be very beneficial for the couple's relationship, helping them to feel secure and happy.
Does sexual intercourse pose any risk soon after a cardiac event (acute myocardial infarction or a period of unstable angina)?	Choose a time when you are rested and relaxed, having had your prescribed medications. Start slowly, allowing the intimacy to build before starting intercourse. This can sometimes be associated with fear and anxiety related to the fear of losing each other.
Will sexual activity damage my heart?	No. Intercourse represents a very small risk of triggering a myocardial infarction. Sexual intercourse uses only 3 – 5 METS, about the equivalent of walking up 2 flights of steps briskly. If your typical angina pain starts, stop and take your nitroglycerin spray as you have been directed. When your pain has completely resolved, you may resume sexual activity, though you may want to go more slowly. Report chest pain when you next see your doctor. It might be that your medications need adjusting or you may need to use nitroglycerin spray before intercourse.
Is it common for people to lose interest in sex after a cardiac event or a myocardial infarction?	Yes. These feelings are common in both the person who has had the cardiac event and/or their partner. Cardiac blues, anxiety or fear can significantly decrease the desire for sex. This situation is normal and often temporary. Open communication about the issue can help, along with cardiac rehabilitation that can help build confidence. There are many ways of expressing your love and fondness without having intercourse, including touch, cuddling and kissing each other without the goal of orgasm. Impotence or a dry vagina may be helped by changing medications and should be discussed with your doctor.
How does depression impact on sexual intimacy?	Depression occurs in approximately 14% of people who have suffered a myocardial infarction. Common symptoms of depression may include some of the following; a loss of interest in things normally found pleasurable – that includes sex, withdrawal from family and social interaction, depressed mood, anger or irritability and disturbance in normal sleep patterns.
Will sex be different now?	More than 75% of people don't change the way they engage in foreplay and sexual positions, though don't hesitate to experiment in ways that make it easier for the individual with the heart condition.
Will medications affect sex?	Modern medications tend to be more specific and have less side effects, though if you are troubled by impotence or not having enough vaginal fluid to make intercourse comfortable, then consult your doctor.
Is it safe to use drugs like Viagra?	Sildenafil (Viagra) should not be used by those using nitroglycerin tablets or spray. It may be used safely for those with stable angina and not taking nitrates.
What if it is not the same?	Like in any relationship, there are many reasons why couples may experience problems with sex. Contributing factors can be too much alcohol, medications (see above), fatigue and stress related to recovery, fear, relationship conflict and depression to name a few.
When should I seek help?	If sex becomes a concern for you, don't hesitate to contact your nurse or doctor.