

Diabetes Research & Wellness Foundation

Sexual health and diabetes for women

By:

Professor Katharine Barnard-Kelly PhD
CPsychol AFBPsS, BHR Ltd;
Dr Darryl Meeking MB ChB MRCP,
Portsmouth Hospitals NHS Trust;
Professor Diana Naranjo,
Stanford University



Staying well until a cure is found...

Sexual health and diabetes

Women with diabetes have a higher rate of sexual problems than women without diabetes. The reasons for this are complex, both biological and psychological. Treatments are available, so don't despair.

There are many different factors involved. These affect women who have type 1 diabetes, type 2 diabetes, gestational diabetes or pre-diabetes. If you are taking diabetes medications, these are unlikely to have any impact on sexual function.

Having one or more factors can lead to problems, either physically, psychologically or both.

Here's what to look out for:

PHYSICAL:

These are problems that relate to the sexual act itself and may include a reduced sex drive, reduced pleasure from sex, a lack of vaginal lubrication and sensation, a reduced ability to orgasm or painful sex.

PSYCHOLOGICAL:

People with diabetes are at increased risk of depression, anxiety or other mood disorders. Feeling a loss of attractiveness, loss of self-image, loss of self-esteem and loneliness or isolation are all common in women with diabetes. These can impact on sexual health.

RELATIONSHIPS:

Communication with partners and feeling supported is really important when it comes to discussing personal issues such as intimacy and sexual relationships.

BODY IMAGE:

Wearing medical devices such as an insulin pump and/or a continuous glucose monitor sensor, or lumps, bumps, adhesive residue or scarring around injection sites can make people feel self-conscious. Even having diabetes can negatively impact the way we see ourselves.

DEMANDS OF DIABETES:

Tiredness, inconvenience of treatments or injections and burden of diabetes management can all get in the way of spontaneity with sex.

Let's tackle these in turn:

Physical

The use of a vaginal lubricant or water-based gel can be helpful for women who experience a lack of lubrication or who have painful sex. Mechanical aids, such as a vibrator, can give more intense stimulation for those who experience a lack of vaginal sensation or reduced ability to orgasm.

Research has also shown that use of an EROS clitoral therapy device can increase blood flow and improve lubrication, sensation, orgasm and satisfaction.

Thrush, cystitis and genito-urinary infection are more common in diabetes and can have negative effects on sexual activity, especially with increased blood glucose levels.



It's complicated

Antibiotic treatment for infections can increase susceptibility to vaginal thrush but your doctor will be able to advise the best solution for you.

Antibiotics can also affect the action of the contraceptive pill; and the pill carries a slightly increased risk of developing blood clots; whilst the use of intra-uterine contraceptive devices can increase the risk of womb infection. It is important to talk to your doctor about your available choices of contraception.



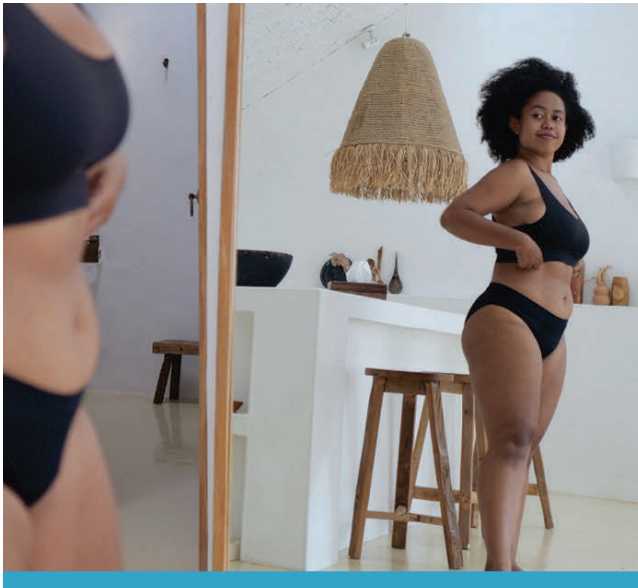
Psychological

Diabetes is negatively associated with a range of psychological effects for many people. Confidence comes from within and these feelings can be overcome with the right help.

Worries about fertility and pregnancy are natural but, if unaddressed, can lead to sexual and relationship difficulties. Pre-pregnancy care and counselling can help explore and address these concerns.

Relationships

Take time to talk with your partner about how you feel and any difficulties you are experiencing sexually. Try to find a time when you won't be interrupted or have to rush away. Write them a note if you feel too uncomfortable or embarrassed to say it out loud.



Body image

Let's face it, we are bombarded with unrealistic images every day that can make us feel ugly. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder and beyond skin-deep, so take a good look in the mirror at the beautiful woman you are! Our imperfections make us perfect, so embrace them and smile. You're more gorgeous than you think. However, if body image becomes a pervasive concern or is impeding on your sex life, counselling can also help to address these concerns.



Demands of diabetes

Juggling diabetes management alongside other life priorities such as work, children, or other everyday household tasks, taking medications or calculating insulin injections, being vigilant with food choices and exercise can be exhausting. It's little wonder sex life can get lost in all of this. Sexual health is important for physical and psychological wellbeing, so nudge it up the priority list and make time to think about it.



Top tips

- **Seek help.** Sexual health is important to your physical and psychological wellbeing. There are treatments available to help you, so see your GP, nurse or a member of your diabetes healthcare team. Don't be embarrassed to seek help. If you feel uncomfortable, write down the questions you have, your symptoms and how you feel and hand the paper to the doctor to save having to say it out loud.
- **Optimise blood glucose** in line with targets set with your healthcare team. UK guidelines say aim for the target of 48mmol/mol or 6.5% HbA1c if you have type 1 or type 2 diabetes, whilst US guidelines are 58mmol/mol or 7.5% HbA1c. Check with your healthcare team as they might suggest a different target for you.
- **Make sure your blood pressure and cholesterol are managed effectively.** Check with your healthcare team about your targets.
- **Counselling.** Seeking professional support for psychological issues can help you explore the underlying causes and find solutions that can work for you.
- **Join a support group** of others living with diabetes and see what you could try that has worked for others.

More information

College of Sexual and Relationship Therapists (COSRT)

Web: www.cosrt.org.uk

Diabetes Research & Wellness Foundation(DRWF)

Building 1000, Langstone Park, Havant PO9 1SA

Tel: **023 9263 7808**

Web: www.drwf.org.uk

DiabetesSisters

1112 W Boughton Road, #180, Bolingbrook,
IL 60440

Web: diabetessisters.org

Email: info@diabetessisters.org

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The Diabetes Research & Wellness Foundation works towards educating, informing and reminding you of the best and healthiest choices to make.

If you would like to become part of our Diabetes Wellness community, visit our website for more details.

www.drwf.org.uk

DRWF, Building 1000, Langstone Park, Havant, Hampshire, PO9 1SA
Tel: **023 9263 7808**
Email: **enquiries@drwf.org.uk**

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