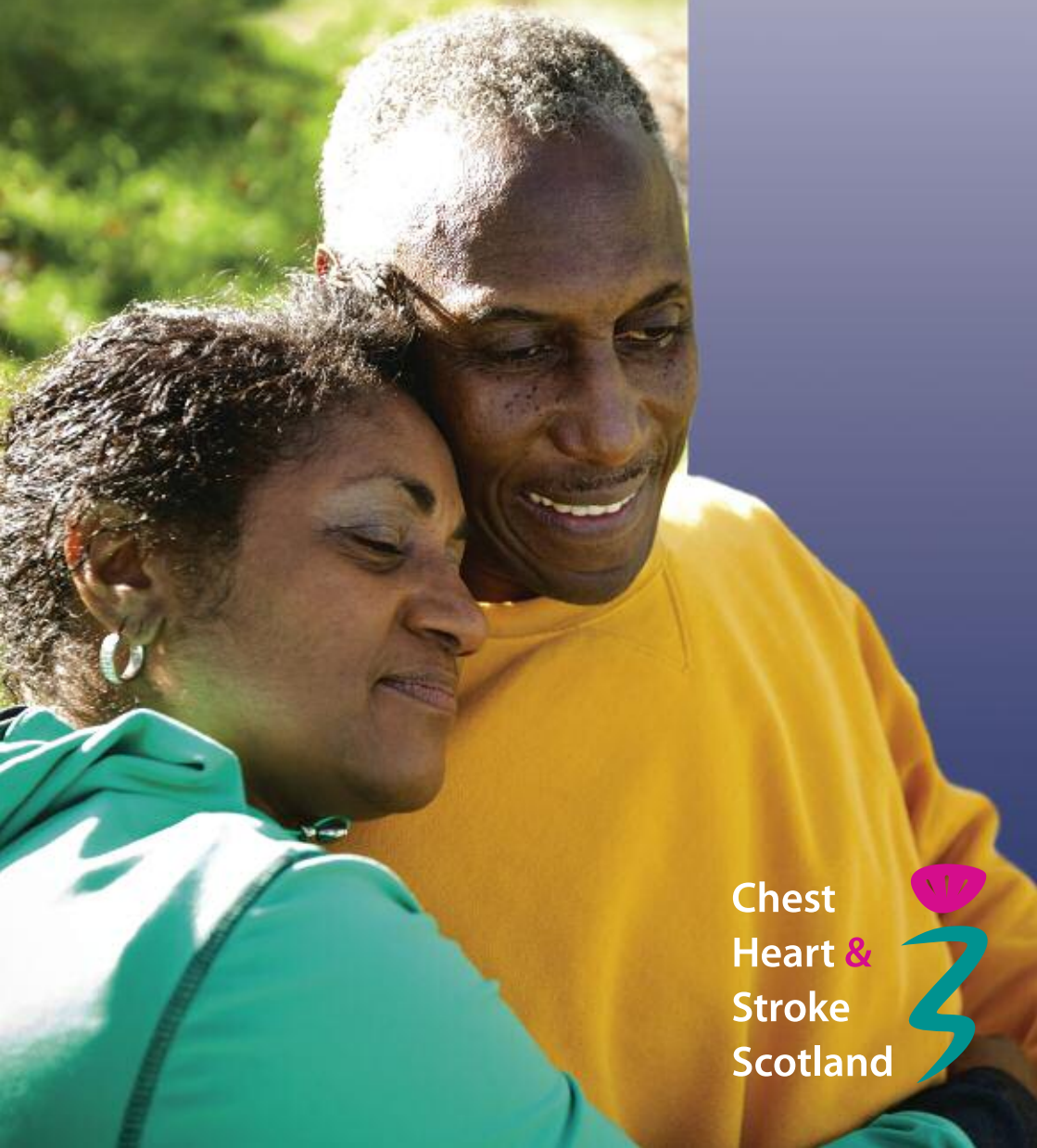


STROKE SERIES SS6

SEX AFTER STROKE ILLNESS



Chest
Heart &
Stroke
Scotland



Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland



**Chest Heart &
Stroke Scotland
improves the
quality of life for
people in Scotland
affected by chest,
heart and stroke
illness, through
medical research,
influencing public
policy, advice and
information and
support in the
community.**

FUNDRAISING

Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland is a wholly independent Scottish charity. We receive no core funding from Government or any public body or private agency and rely entirely on the Scottish public to raise the £7 million a year we need to help people with chest, heart and stroke illness throughout Scotland.

RESEARCH

We are one of Scotland's largest charitable funders of medical research, with a programme worth over £600,000 a year. We fund research projects throughout Scotland into all aspects of the prevention, diagnosis, treatment and social impact of chest, heart and stroke illness.

PERSONAL SUPPORT GRANTS

We provide small grants to people in financial difficulty, because of chest, heart or stroke illness, for items ranging from disability equipment and household goods to respite care and holidays.

VOLUNTEER SERVICES

We give support to people whose communication skills are impaired after a stroke and those living with heart failure. The Volunteer Stroke Service (VSS) provides weekly group meetings and home visits for patients. The Heart Failure Support Service (HFSS) provides volunteer befrienders to reduce social isolation.

CHSS NURSES

Our nurses provide independent practical advice and support to those who have chest, heart and stroke illnesses, their families, carers and health professionals. There are dedicated nursing services in Fife, Forth Valley, Grampian, Highland, Lanarkshire, Lothian and Dumfries and Galloway. There is also a Scotland wide nurse led Advice Line (0845) 077 6000. Calls are charged at a local call rate (out of hours answerphone). We have a wide range of booklets, factsheets and videos on chest, heart and stroke illnesses.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT NETWORK

CHSS provides support to affiliated chest, heart and stroke clubs through the Community Support Network. The clubs are independent and are run by local volunteers. The groups provide a range of activities and offer people support, stimulation and companionship in a friendly and relaxed environment. Please ask for more information.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT ANY OF
THE SERVICES ABOVE PLEASE CONTACT HEAD
OFFICE BY PHONING 0131 225 6963 OR VISIT
www.chss.org.uk**

SEX AFTER STROKE ILLNESS

Introduction

Your recovery from a stroke will have taken you through various stages. Coming to terms with what has happened to you takes time and initially you will have been focusing on the more functional aspects of your stroke such as learning to walk, talk and care for yourself. Further down the line your mind may turn to more personal matters such as establishing or renewing a sexual relationship. If being sexually active was important to you before your stroke it is likely that you will feel that way again. However there may be some physical and emotional issues that now have to be considered.

Stroke affects everyone differently and to different degrees so it is very unlikely for two people to have exactly the same experience.

This booklet aims to look at some of the issues involved in being sexually active after a stroke and will hopefully answer some questions that you may have.

Fear

A common fear following a stroke is that having sex will bring on another stroke. There is no reason why after a couple of weeks you cannot begin to have sex if you feel ready to do so. Medical evidence supports this. If you still feel unsure about having sex then arrange to speak to your General Practitioner (GP). Try not to feel embarrassed as your GP will be used to talking about such personal matters even if you are not.

Physical changes

Having a stroke does not have to mean the end of being sexually active, although changes may be involved.

Physically, stroke can affect men and women in different ways.

Both may find that libido (sex drive) is lessened due to tiredness, anxiety, depression, pain, doubts about self-image and concerns for the future.

A woman may find that sexual arousal takes longer after her stroke. There may be a loss of sensation or a degree of vaginal dryness, which may hinder sexual activity.

A man is more likely to be concerned if he finds he is unable to achieve or sustain an erection. This can happen after a stroke for many reasons but it is also common after any serious illness. Unfortunately many men equate this with their masculinity and worrying about failing to have an erection can have that very effect. So a vicious circle begins. After a stroke, even if one

side of the body has been affected, the nerve processes involved on the unaffected side are usually enough to sustain an erection.

Other reasons for impotence in men

The side effect of some medicines such as anti-depressants and blood pressure lowering drugs as well as conditions such as diabetes and prostate problems may also cause erection problems in men. These types of problems may require further investigation by your GP, who may review your medications and, if needed, refer you to a specialist.

Self medication with drugs to treat impotence or erectile dysfunction (e.g. VIAGRA®) is NOT recommended following a stroke.

Increase in libido

A minority of people experience an increased libido and sexual activity after a stroke. In the most part, this is probably explained by improved relations with your partner and by improvement in the emotional and social aspects experienced.

Very rarely a stroke can cause a disorder called hypersexuality, which can be related to the area of brain damaged by the stroke. This is described as an abnormal, increased sexual desire.



Emotional changes

Both men and women experience similar emotional problems after a stroke. How you feel about yourself and how you perceive others feel towards you, can lead to you losing confidence in yourself. It can take time to come to terms with and adjust to the changes in your life after a stroke. As a result many people experience anxiety and depression. This can have a knock on affect on your desire for sex.

Change in relationships

Retaining closeness and intimacy within your relationship will help to overcome difficulties. Some people feel that they are letting their partner down and this can lead to feelings of inadequacy and guilt. It is important to keep communicating with each other. You can express your feelings in many different ways,



through talking but also with body language and physical contact such as kissing and cuddling. Getting the better of anxiety and shyness in taking the first step may be the biggest hurdle to overcome.

There can be a subtle change within a relationship when a partner becomes a carer, especially when assistance is needed with personal care. This can sometimes cause embarrassment or affect the way you feel about each other.

Potential difficulties

It is very important to remember that there are physical, emotional and social reasons for a decline in sexual function and satisfaction after a stroke. In addition communication problems after a stroke can lead to feelings of frustration and anger and can contribute to relationship difficulties.

Physical difficulties

- tiredness
- delayed arousal
- vaginal dryness
- medication induced impotence
- loss of movement
- loss of sensation
- having a urinary catheter
- pain
- finding comfortable position

Emotional difficulties

- fear of impotence or loss of sex drive
- actual loss of sexual desire
- changes in self image
- decreased confidence
- low self esteem
- change in social role - in family and community
- embarrassment
- anxiety
- depression

Social difficulties and general attitude towards sexuality

- inability to discuss sexuality
- unwillingness to participate in sexual activity
- degree of physical disability involved

Blood Pressure

Many people worry that having sex will raise their blood pressure too high.

In fact, sex only affects your blood pressure in the same way as exercise does. It is very rare for strokes to happen during sexual activity, but if this is worrying you, you should speak to your doctor for reassurance.

Unfortunately, some blood pressure lowering drugs can cause impotence in some men. This is completely reversible by changing to a different group of drugs. Therefore, it is vital that you discuss this with your doctor so that something can be done about it.

Contraception and pregnancy

Following stroke there is no reason why you cannot conceive, have a normal pregnancy and have a healthy baby.

Because there is a small risk attached to taking the combined oral contraceptive pill, alternative methods of family planning may need to be explored; you should discuss this further with your doctor.



Avoid excessive alcohol

Practical steps to improve things

Plan for sexual activity in advance, just as you would plan for any other activity. This may not seem very romantic at first but it can help to make sex more comfortable and enjoyable.

- Pay attention to personal hygiene and grooming as this makes most of us feel more attractive and better about ourselves.
- Choose a time when both of you are feeling rested, relaxed and when privacy is guaranteed.
- Avoid a heavy meal or wait a couple of hours after eating.
- Avoid excessive alcohol as this can have an effect on the ability to achieve or maintain an erection.
- Alcohol can also increase tiredness and drowsiness.
- If your stroke restricts your movement and / or sensation, explore different positions, which might suit you both better.
- Make sure you are comfortable. Cushions can help to support any affected limbs.
- Try talking with your partner, and identify any problems you are experiencing. Ways around difficulties can often be found.
- Having a urinary catheter need not prevent you from having penetrative sex. Females can tape the tube out of the way; males can wear a condom with the tube folded back over the penis.
- Try using lubrication jelly.

Sexual fulfilment

There are other ways of expressing your feelings for someone and achieving sexual fulfilment even if you cannot manage, or feel like, penetrative sex. Most people feel the need for and benefit from physical contact and you can give and receive a lot of pleasure through kissing, cuddling and massage.

Remember if sex was important to you before your stroke there is no reason why you cannot have a sex life after your stroke, whether this is initiating a new relationship or resuming an old one. However, keeping an open mind and giving yourself time to adjust is often the solution to getting your sex life back on track.



USEFUL ADDRESSES AND WEBSITES

Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland

Rosebery House
9 Haymarket Terrace
Edinburgh EH12 5EZ
Tel: 0131 225 6963
Fax: 0131 220 6313
Advice Line: 0845 077 6000
E-mail: advice@chss.org.uk
Website: www.chss.org.uk

Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland improves the quality of life for people in Scotland affected by chest, heart and stroke illness, through medical research, influencing public policy, advice and information and support in the community.

The Sexual Advice Association

Suite 301, Emblem House
London Bridge Hospital
27 Tooley Street
London SE1 2PR
Helpline / Telephone: 020 7486 7262
Email: info@sexualadviceassociation.co.uk
Website: www.sda.uk.net

The Sexual Advice Association is committed to helping and supporting people, and partners of people, with all forms of sexual dysfunction by raising awareness and providing information and education on male and female sexual problems.

Relationships Scotland

18 York Place

Edinburgh EH1 3EP

Tel: 0845 119 2020

Fax: 0845 119 6089

Website: www.relationships-scotland.org.uk

Relationships Scotland offer confidential relationship counselling and sexual therapy for couples and individuals. These services are provided across Scotland. Local details available by telephone and on the website.

Further reading is available in all good bookshops.

Contact the Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland Advice Line nurses for confidential, independent advice.



**The line is open
Monday – Friday
9.30 – 4.00**

**0845 077 6000 or
0131 225 6963**

Out of hours answering machine.

Email: adviceline@chss.org.uk

The information contained in this booklet is based on current guidelines and is correct at time of printing. The content is also put out to peer, patient and expert review. If you have any comments about this booklet please contact Lorna McTernan, Health Information Manager, at the address on the facing page.

STROKE PUBLICATIONS

Booklets			
SS1	Stroke: a guide to your recovery	F10	10 common questions asked after a stroke
SS2	Stroke: a carers guide	F11	Mouthcare after a stroke
SS3	Reducing the risk of stroke	F12	Continence problems after stroke
SS4	I've had a stroke	F14	Eye problems after stroke
SS5	Understanding TIA's	F15	Memory problems after stroke
SS6	Sex after stroke illness	F16	Positioning and stroke
SS7	Stroke in younger people	F25	ACT FAST
SS8	Coming to terms with a stroke	F27	HRT and stroke
SS9	Thinking and behaviour issues after stroke	F29	Swallowing problems after stroke
S10	Thrombolysis after stroke	F31	Carotid endarterectomy
H4	Living with high blood pressure Aphasia Stroke Journey:	General Factsheets	
ASJ1	Part 1 Early days	F6	Holidays
ASJ2	Part 2 Rehabilitation	F7	Insurance companies
ASJ3	Part 3 Moving On	F8	Suggested booklet
CSB	Conversation Support Book (one copy free) £5	F13	Air travel for people affected by chest, heart and stroke illness
IDC	Aphasia ID Card	F17	Diabetes: links with heart disease and stroke
Video/DVDs		F18	Coping with tiredness
	Stroke Matters £5	F19	MCNs & You
Stroke Factsheets		F20	Illustrated risk factors (ethnic target)
F1	Smoking	F21	Illustrated risk factors (general target)
F2	Salt	F22	How to make the most of a visit to your doctor
F3	Cholesterol	F23	Living with stress and anxiety
F4	Warfarin	F24	Healthy eating
F5	Helping communication after stroke	F26	Understanding help in the community
F9	Driving after a stroke	F28	Glossary
		F30	Just move!
		F32	Pulmonary rehabilitation FAQs

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www.chss.org.uk

Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland is a wholly independent Scottish charity. We receive no core funding from Government or any public body or private agency.

We need your help to achieve our aim of improving the lives of those in Scotland with chest, heart and stroke illness. You can help by volunteering your time with our services, by supporting your local Regional office or as a fundraiser. You can help by giving now and in the future, by making a donation, organising a local fundraising event, leaving us a gift in your will or by setting up a regular Direct Debit.

If you would like to speak to one of our Advice Line nurses in confidence, phone Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland Advice Line.

**Monday – Friday
9.30am – 4.00pm**

**0845 077 6000 or
0131 225 6963**

Email us: adviceline@chss.org.uk

There is a text relay service for the hearing-impaired.

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January 2012