Brain injury and sexual issues
Brain injury can change the way a person experiences and expresses their sexuality. Common problems can include reduced sex drive, difficulties with sexual functioning (such as erectile problems) and behaving sexually at inappropriate times.

Talking about sex can be embarrassing, but it is important for the person with brain injury and their loved ones to discuss the various problems and seek professional advice.

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Talking about sex can be embarrassing, but it is important for the person with brain injury and their loved ones to discuss the various issues. Seek professional advice. If your specialists don’t discuss sexual issues after brain injury, ask – everyone is entitled to express their sexuality.

How traumatic injury affects the brain

Acquired brain injury (ABI) refers to any type of brain damage that occurs after birth. Causes can include damage resulting from infection, disease, lack of oxygen or a blow to the head. Traumatic brain injury (TBI) is one type of ABI. It is usually caused by a direct injury to the head – for example, in a car accident.

Traumatic brain injury can cause changes in thinking, behaviour and body function, depending on which brain areas were affected and to what degree. Generally, the more severe the injury, the more significant the symptoms and loss of function will be.

Changes to sexual behaviour after traumatic brain injury (TBI)

Common changes in sexual behaviour after a traumatic head injury include:

- Reduced libido – about half of people with a traumatic head injury experience a drop in sex drive. The remainder experience increased libido or no change at all.
- Erectile problems – between 40 and 60 per cent of men have either temporary or permanent impotence following their injury.
- Inability to orgasm – up to 40 per cent of men and women report difficulties having an orgasm.
- Reduced frequency of sex – possible reasons for this include disability, depression, relationship break-up and sexual problems.

Causes of sexual problems and TBI

Sexual functioning and arousal involve a number of areas of the brain. If those areas are damaged, a person may experience difficulties having sex. They may not feel sexual in the same way, even though their physical functions still work.

Other factors after brain damage may also contribute to, or even cause, the person’s sexual problems. These factors could include:

- Emotions – depression, anxiety and stress can reduce sex drive.
- Medications – certain medications can dampen libido.
- Associated injuries – if, for example, the person’s brain was injured in an accident, they may have other injuries that directly affect their sexual functioning (such as a spinal cord injury).
- Relationship breakdown – a couple experiencing problems are less likely to have sex.
- Prior sexual difficulties – brain injury can make worse any sexual problems the person was having before the injury occurred.
- Reduced confidence – the person may feel less confident or attractive after the brain injury, which makes them less likely to feel sexual.
- Other illnesses – such as diabetes or hypertension (high blood pressure) can reduce libido.

Resuming sex after brain injury

Before resuming sex, talk with your doctor. Be guided by their advice, but general suggestions include:

- Talk about your expectations, fears and feelings. A couple can solve most relationship problems if they communicate frankly with each other.
- Take it easy, and try not to put too much pressure on yourselves.
- Focus on pleasure, rather than technique. You may need to change your earlier style of lovemaking for a while. For example, if penis-in-vagina sex isn’t possible, experiment with other sexual activities including oral sex and mutual masturbation.
- Concentrate on boosting the romance in your relationship. Suggestions include remembering to appreciate and compliment each other, offering lots of affection (such as kissing and cuddling) and celebrating special occasions such as birthdays and anniversaries.
Overcoming sexual problems after brain injury

You should discuss any sexual difficulties after brain injury with your doctor, who can give you information and advice. General suggestions include:

- Seek treatment for depression, stress and anxiety, if necessary.
- If your reduced libido is due to medication, it may be possible to take different medications under your doctor’s supervision.
- Treatment for erectile problems includes counselling and medication.
- Some people with brain injury forget about important sexual issues such as contraception, initiating sex or pleasuring their partner during sex. Counselling may be useful.
- Prior contraceptive methods may not be practical after brain injury – for example, a woman with memory problems may forget to take the pill every day. Seek advice on the best contraceptives for you.
- Use aids such as erotic videos and magazines to help arousal.

Inappropriate sexual behaviour after brain injury

Sometimes, a person with brain injury may behave sexually at inappropriate times – for example, they may masturbate in front of people. This type of behaviour can be difficult for family members.

Seek advice from your doctor, but general suggestions include:

- Try to be calm. If you appear shocked or distressed, it could make the person feel there is something wrong with their sexuality.
- Tell the person that their behaviour is inappropriate and offer alternatives. For example, you could ask them to masturbate in their bedroom instead of in the lounge room.
- You may need to remind the person many times to curb their inappropriate sexual behaviour, so be patient.
- Discuss the issue with the person’s therapists or other support staff. Family members and others closely involved with the person should also be consulted. Try to develop a consistent way of dealing with inappropriate behaviour.
- Talk about sexual issues with the person. Set firm boundaries on sexual behaviour. Help them to find appropriate and satisfying ways to express their sexuality.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Neurologist
- Disability Support, Family Planning Victoria Tel. 03 9257 0100
- BrainLink Tel. 1800 677 579
- Leadership Plus: Disability, Diversity and Social Change Tel. (03) 9489 2999
- Brain Foundation Tel. 1300 886 660 or (03) 9905 3950
- Brain Injury Australia Tel. (02) 9808 9390 or 1800 BRAIN1 (1800 272 461)
- Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) Rehabilitation Unit, Epworth Hospital Tel. (03) 1300 GO REHAB (46 73422
- Brain Disorders Programme Victoria, ABI Behaviour Consultancy Service Tel. (03) 9409 7366

Things to remember

- Brain injury can change the way a person experiences and expresses their sexuality.
- Common problems can include reduced sex drive, difficulties with sexual functioning (such as erectile problems) and behaving sexually at inappropriate times.
- Talking about sex can be embarrassing, but it is important for the person with brain injury and their loved ones to discuss the various problems and seek professional advice.

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More information

Brains and nerves

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- Brain and nerve basics
- Brain and head injury
- Brain tumours
- Brain related conditions
- Epilepsy and seizures
- Nerve related conditions
- Spinal cord
- Speech and language
- Tests and procedures

Brain and nerve basics

- Brain

  Messages relay between the brain and the motor and sensory nerves of the body in a constant 'conversation'...

- Brain surgery
Brain surgery is performed for a number of reasons, including alterations in brain tissue, brain blood flow and cerebrospinal fluid.

- Central nervous system birth defects
  Folic acid taken before conception, and during at least the first four weeks of pregnancy, can prevent around seven out of 10 cases of neural tube defects.

- Coma
  A wide range of illnesses, conditions and events can cause coma.

- Epilepsy and Young People - Diagnosis (video)
  Epilepsy is the world's most common serious brain disorder and is characterised by a tendency to have recurrent seizures. Most seizures are spontaneous and brief, yet self-limiting and can involve.

- Nervous system
  The nervous system helps all the parts of the body to communicate with each other.

Brain and head injury

- Acquired brain injury
  The long-term effects of brain injury will be different for each person and can range from mild to profound.

- Alcohol related brain impairment
  A person with alcohol related brain impairment (ARBI) might experience problems with coordination, thinking, planning and memory.

- Alcohol related brain impairment - memory loss
  If a person with alcohol related brain impairment is aware of their memory limits, they can learn how to deal with them.

- Alcohol related brain impairment - support
  People with alcohol related brain impairment benefit when their life is organised and follows a good structure.

- Brain injury and sexual issues
  A brain injury can change the way a person experiences and expresses their sexuality.

- Head and spinal injuries first aid
  Head injuries can be serious and require urgent medical attention. A hard blow to the head from a fall, knock or assault can injure the brain, even when there are no visible signs of trauma to the.

- Head injuries and concussion
  There is no specific treatment for mild head injury other than plenty of rest, and not overdoing things.

- Subarachnoid haemorrhage
  A subarachnoid haemorrhage is any bleed located underneath one of the protective layers of the brain known as the arachnoid layer.

- Subdural haematomas
  Subdural haematomas are blood clots formed underneath one of the protective layers of the brain.

Brain tumours

- Acoustic neuroma
  In its earlier stages, an acoustic neuroma can present similar symptoms to other, less serious conditions, which may delay diagnosis and treatment.

- Brain tumours - cancer
  Brain cancer symptoms and treatment depend on which part of the brain is affected.

- Brain tumours - gliomas
  Gliomas are brain tumours associated with the three types of glial cell in the brain.

- Meningioma
  A meningioma is a non-cancerous brain tumour and responds well to treatment.

- Pituitary tumour
  Generally, pituitary tumours are benign and slow growing, and pituitary cancers are extremely rare.

Brain related conditions
• **Amnesia**
  Loss of memory can be temporary or permanent, but ‘amnesia’ usually refers to the temporary variety...

• **Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD)**
  Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease is characterised by physical deterioration of the brain, dementia and walking difficulties...

• **Dementia explained**
  Dementia is not a normal part of ageing and can happen to anybody...

• **Epilepsy and Young People - Diagnosis (video)**
  Epilepsy is the world's most common serious brain disorder and is characterised by a tendency to have recurrent seizures. Most seizures are spontaneous and brief yet self-limiting and can involve...

• **Headache**
  Although nearly all of us will experience a headache during our lifetime, persistent headaches need to be medically investigated with tests such as scans, eye tests or sinus x-rays...

• **Headache – migraine**
  Migraine causes a severe and throbbing headache, usually on one side of the head, as well as symptoms such as nausea.

• **Hydrocephalus**
  Hydrocephalus is the abnormal enlargement of the brain cavities (ventricles) caused by a build-up of cerebrospinal fluid.

• **Leukodystrophy**
  Leukodystrophy refers to a group of inherited disorders that affect the white matter of the brain, which causes loss of normal brain functions.

• **Stroke explained**
  A stroke interrupts blood flow to an area of the brain and is a medical emergency...

**Epilepsy and seizures**

• **Epilepsy and employment**
  Many people living with epilepsy are successfully employed across a range of professional fields.

• **Epilepsy**
  Medication can provide seizure control for approximately 70 per cent of people with epilepsy.

• **Epilepsy and exercise**
  It is rare for a person with epilepsy to have a seizure during physical activity, but you should always take safety precautions when exercising.

• **Epilepsy and Young People - Diagnosis (video)**
  Epilepsy is the world's most common serious brain disorder and is characterised by a tendency to have recurrent seizures. Most seizures are spontaneous and brief yet self-limiting and can involve.

• **Epilepsy - first aid and safety**
  Good seizure management is an important part of reducing the risks associated with epilepsy.

• **Epilepsy in children**
  Children with epilepsy generally have seizures that respond well to medication, and they enjoy a normal and active childhood.

• **Epilepsy - lifestyle issues**
  Learn about your epilepsy so that you can make informed decisions about your lifestyle.

• **Fever - febrile convulsions**
  A febrile convulsion is a fit that occurs in children when they have a high fever.

• **Fibromyalgia**
  Fibromyalgia is a condition associated with widespread pain and tenderness.

• **Medicinal cannabis**
  Medicinal cannabis is a legal, high quality medicine that can be prescribed for people by their doctor.

betterhealth.vic.gov.au
Nerve related conditions

- **Bell's palsy**
  The majority of people with Bell's palsy, around 90 per cent, will recover completely with time.

- **Carpal tunnel syndrome**
  Carpal tunnel syndrome can be caused by repetitive hand movements, pregnancy and arthritis.

- **Complex regional pain syndrome (CRPS)**
  Complex regional pain syndrome (CRPS) is a painful condition of a person’s arm, hand, leg or foot, which occurs after an injury, such as a fracture.

- **Diabetes type 2**
  Type 2 diabetes may be prevented, but it cannot be cured.

- **Diabetic neuropathy**
  Diabetes is the most common cause of neuropathy.

- **Eyes - optic neuritis**
  Optic neuritis is inflammation of the optic nerve that causes blurred, grey and dim vision.

- **Friedreich's ataxia**
  To the casual observer, a person with Friedreich ataxia may seem to be drunk.

- **Guillain-Barré syndrome**
  Most people with Guillain-Barré syndrome experienced some form of viral or bacterial infection before the onset of symptoms.

- **Neuralgia**
  Neuralgia is pain in a nerve pathway. Generally, neuralgia isn’t an illness in its own right, but a symptom of injury or a particular disorder.

- **Pins and needles**
  Pins and needles is a sensation of uncomfortable tingling or prickling, usually felt in the hands or feet.

Spinal cord

- **Quadriplegics - tendon transfer surgery**
  Many quadriplegics could live more independent lives with a highly specialised operation called tendon transfer surgery.

- **Spina bifida**
  Folate can prevent up to 70 per cent of spina bifida cases if taken daily for one month before conception and during the first three months of pregnancy.

- **Spinal cord injury - paraplegia**
  Most people who have a spinal cord injury are young males, who have a greater tendency to indulge in risky behaviour.

- **Spinal muscular atrophy (SMA)**
  A child with spinal muscular atrophy type 1 rarely lives beyond three years of age.

- **Syringomyelia**
  Syringomyelia is the growth of a cyst in the spinal cord that may result in paraplegia or quadriplegia if not treated.

Speech and language

- **Childhood apraxia of speech**
  Childhood apraxia of speech affects a person’s ability to organise the muscles used in speech.

- **Dyslexia**
  Dyslexia is a type of specific learning difficulty (SLD) in which the person has difficulties with language and words.

- **Stuttering**
  Children who stutter should see a speech pathologist, preferably before they start school.

Tests and procedures

- **CT scan**
The CT scan is a medical imaging procedure that uses x-rays and digital computer technology to create detailed images of the body...

- EEG test
  In a person with epilepsy, an electroencephalogram (EEG) may show bursts of abnormal discharges in the form of spikes and sharp wave patterns...

- MRI scan
  The MRI scan is a medical imaging procedure that uses a magnetic field and radio waves to take pictures inside the body...

- PET scan
  PET scans are tests that show how an organ or tissue is working...

- X-ray examinations
  An x-ray examination uses a special machine to take two-dimensional pictures of internal body structures to help diagnose conditions or injuries...

Related Information

- Acquired brain injury
  The long-term effects of brain injury will be different for each person and can range from mild to profound...

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- Intellectual disability and sexuality
  People with intellectual disability can express their sexuality in satisfying ways...

Home

Related information on other websites

- Liverpool Hospital, Sydney – Trauma Department.
- Synapse: Brain Injury Association of Queensland.

Content Partner

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