Cognitive disability and sexuality
Summary

- People with intellectual disability can express their sexuality in satisfying ways.
- The attitudes and support of other people are essential in helping people of all abilities to have healthy personal and sexual relationships.
- Sexual abuse or exploitation is always wrong and should be treated as a very serious matter.

Sexuality is a key part of human nature. People with intellectual disability experience the same range of sexual thoughts, attitudes, feelings, desires, fantasies and activities as anyone else. To understand and enjoy sexuality, everyone needs adequate information and support from a young age.

Sexuality has psychological, biological and social aspects, and is influenced by individual values and attitudes. A person’s sexuality develops throughout childhood and adolescence, and is a key part of their identity. The way each person understands and interprets their sexuality varies significantly, and often changes over time. Healthy self-esteem and respect for self and others are important factors in developing positive sexuality.

Most people with intellectual disability can have rewarding personal relationships. However, some may need additional support to develop relationships, explore and express their sexuality, and access sexual health information and services.

In Victoria, all people aged 16 years and over, including those with disability, are entitled to privacy and choice, within the law, regarding their sexuality and sexual activity.

Sexuality education for people with intellectual disability

A child’s sexuality education comes from a range of sources, including their parents, teachers and friends. People with intellectual disability also require sexuality education that:

- teaches them that people with disability can have fulfilling sex lives
- covers age-appropriate sexual issues that may be associated with their particular disability
- explains social rules, such as telling the difference between private and public behaviours
- is delivered in a way that a person with intellectual disability can understand.

It is important for parents to have access to the information they need to support their child in dealing with particular challenges they may face.

Some adults with intellectual disability may have received adequate sexuality education at school, while others may have missed out. Those who have received adequate education may need follow-up information that is suitable for an adult of their level of ability and literacy. For those who have missed out, it is important to start at the beginning, no matter how old they are.

Social opportunities, sexual relationships and intellectual disability

The opportunity to mix with other people of both sexes, whether socially, at school or at work, is important in developing confidence and social skills. However, some people with intellectual disability may have fewer opportunities to form social and sexual relationships for a number of reasons, including:

- a lack of privacy
- being dependent on others for daily living
- a lack of confidence about their physical appearance and ability
- less knowledge of how to negotiate relationships and express their sexuality
- a limited social circle and a lack of social experience
- physical or cognitive limitations
- carers who wrongly think of them as childlike or asexual
- carers who view their sexuality as something to be feared and controlled.

A person with intellectual disability may need additional support to explore sexuality and relationships. This can be particularly relevant to people with high support needs, for example, those who live with their parents or in supported housing, or those who need help with communication or personal care, such as toileting.

People in these situations may want sexual relationships, but wrongly, this may not be permitted by their parents or carers. They may lack the privacy needed for sexual activity. Restrictions at home may lead some people into unsafe or illegal activity, such as sex in parks or other public places.

Sexual sensation and function and intellectual disability

There are many different types of disability. Intellectual or cognitive disability may be caused by a genetic (inherited) condition, difficulties that occurred during childbirth, an illness or an accident.

Sometimes, a person with intellectual disability may be less able to enjoy sex, which may be due to:

- the disability itself or its physical or emotional consequences
- a physical injury
- prescribed medication
- ageing
- psychological illnesses, including depression.
A person with intellectual disability who is experiencing problems with sexual sensation or function can talk to a doctor, sex therapist or support group for suggestions on how to overcome these challenges.

**Body image, intellectual disability and sexuality**

In some ways, society presents a narrow view of how men and women should look, particularly through the media. A person with intellectual disability may feel less worthy of a healthy sexual relationship because they do not match this idealised image. Talking with other people who have overcome body image concerns or a counsellor may help.

**Appropriate sexual behaviour and intellectual disability**

Sometimes, a person with intellectual disability may exhibit inappropriate sexual behaviour, such as public masturbation, or soliciting sex from minors or in public. This is more likely to occur when the person lacks more appropriate sexual outlets, or has not been provided with appropriate education about the complicated social etiquette and legal issues around sexual behaviour and relationships.

Sometimes, police may charge the person with a sexual offence. The person may also be restricted in unreasonable ways, such as a man being prescribed medication by a doctor to suppress androgens (male hormones). However, appropriate education and behavioural training are, in most cases, better ways of addressing issues such as these.

Unfortunately, some people with intellectual disability may have received the message that any sexual expression is unacceptable. This may need to be addressed before the person can learn more acceptable behaviours.

**Contraception for people with intellectual disability**

All women and men, including those with disability, have the right to make their own informed choices about which method of contraception they use. To make these choices, people need adequate, accurate and accessible information about reproduction, the purpose of contraception and their contraceptive options.

Some people with intellectual disability may find it difficult to access contraception and other sexual health products and services, especially if they cannot be open with their family or carers about their sexual activity. The contraceptive choices available to a person with intellectual disability may be limited for a number of reasons, including:

- Certain medication can interfere with oral contraception, the contraceptive vaginal ring, the contraceptive implant or emergency contraception (EC, also known as ‘the morning after pill’).
- The contraceptive injection (depot medroxyprogesterone acetate, known as Depo-Provera) and contraceptive implant (Implanon NXT) may cause unpredictable bleeding that can be difficult for some women with an intellectual disability to manage.
- There can be difficulties with insertion of the contraceptive implant or an intrauterine device, which can be overcome by having the procedure while sedated or under anaesthetic.
- Some women have difficulty remembering to take tablets such as the contraceptive pill regularly. This can be overcome by supervised use.
- Some people with intellectual disability may have difficulty negotiating the use of condoms.

It is important to remember that EC can prevent pregnancy after having unprotected sex, for example, if a pill is missed, a condom breaks, or a woman is sexually assaulted. EC is available from pharmacists without a doctor’s prescription. It should be taken as soon as possible, ideally within 24 hours of having sex, but it still works well within 96 hours (four days). It can be taken within 96 to 120 hours (five days), but it will not be very effective.

It is legal in Victoria for any woman to seek to terminate a pregnancy. All people are entitled to access support and counselling about issues relating to abortion.

**Reproductive rights for people with intellectual disability**

Most Australian states and territories, including Victoria, have laws designed to protect people with ‘impaired capacity’ from sexual exploitation. However, people sometimes misunderstand these laws to mean that it is illegal for a person with intellectual disability to have sex. This may make families and support organisations wary of supporting sexual relationships.

While the question of understanding and giving informed consent to sexual activity may sometimes be more complex for people with intellectual disability, they still have the same right to consensual sexual relationships as others in the community.

The law states that a court or tribunal authority is needed before a child can be lawfully sterilised, unless the sterilisation is associated with surgery to treat a medical condition or disease, and that sterilisation is the last resort. An adult with intellectual disability can choose to be sterilised if they have the capacity to make the decision. If they lack the capacity to make this decision, it must be referred to a tribunal authority.

For more information about forced sterilisation and consent to medical procedures, contact the Office of the Public Advocate or Victorian Civil Administrative Tribunal.

**Genetic services for people with intellectual disability**

Some people with intellectual disability who are pregnant or are considering having a child may want to use genetic services such as diagnosis, screening and testing, counselling, education, clinical research and information on the management of individuals and families with a history of particular health conditions. Access to services such as these will help people to make the best decisions for themselves and their children.

**Pregnancy, parenthood and intellectual disability**

Some people with intellectual disability, such as men and women with Down syndrome, have lower fertility, but many others are as fertile as the general community. Many people with intellectual disability want to have children. However, their own family or carers may oppose this, making it difficult for the couple to plan for pregnancy and parenting, and to access the necessary services for themselves and their baby.

Many people with intellectual disability can be loving partners and parents, maintain strong relationships and care for a child. Parents with intellectual disability usually

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Sexual health and people with intellectual disability

People with intellectual disability should have the same choice regarding preventative health measures for sexually transmissible infections (STIs) and other conditions as people without disability, including:

- Condoms should be used to prevent the transmission of STIs. The person with disability may need to be provided with appropriate and accurate education about STIs and condoms, including the opportunity to practice how to put condoms on correctly.
- Nearly all women with intellectual disability can learn menstrual hygiene, just like any other woman. A woman's menstrual cycle should not be suppressed just because of her intellectual disability.
- Women who are or have been sexually active should have a regular pap test to help prevent cervical cancer. If a woman with intellectual disability has difficulty with pap tests, she can contact PapScreen Victoria.
- People with disability should participate in immunisation programs, including the HPV (human papillomavirus) vaccine and immunisation program, which helps prevent cervical cancer.
- Women need to understand the importance of being aware of how their breasts normally look and feel and should be encouraged to see a doctor if they notice anything unusual.
- Women aged over 50 years need to consider having a mammogram for the early detection of breast cancer. A doctor can provide more information about this.
- Men need to understand the importance of seeing a doctor if they notice a lump or anything unusual with their testicles.

When providing health services to people with intellectual disability, doctors and other healthcare professionals need to take into account the particular disability and circumstances of their client. For example, some women with intellectual disability can find a gynaecological examination or procedure such as a pap test overwhelming. It is important for people with intellectual disability to provide informed consent before these procedures are carried out, unless in the case of medical emergency.

Sexual abuse or exploitation of people with intellectual disability

All people, including those with intellectual disability, have the right to enjoy relationships and sexuality without being abused or exploited. Unfortunately, statistics show that people with disability experience all forms of abuse at much higher rates than people without disability.

Reasons for this include:

- inadequate sexuality education on where and when it is acceptable to be touched by other people
- inability to resist, protest against or stop abusive behaviour from happening
- not knowing that a person has the right to decide what happens to their body, especially if they are used to other people constantly attending to their physical needs
- being raised in situations where they are used to being told what to do and therefore going along with requests or demands made by an abuser
- agreeing to engage in sexual activity to fulfill unsatisfied cravings for attention, affection or rewards
- consenting to initial sexual activity, but not to sexual activity that follows, which amounts to abuse.

Just as in the wider population, assaults against people with disability are more likely to be perpetrated by somebody they know, such as a family member, carer, work colleague or someone they live with. Research also shows that sexual assaults on people with disability are less likely to be reported.

Reasons for this include:

- Some people with disability find it difficult to communicate with others.
- A person may tell someone of the assault, but that person may not understand them.
- A person may have limited knowledge or ability to report what happened to them.
- Some people wrongly think the effect of sexual assault on a person with disability is not as serious as an assault on someone without disability.
- A person may not be believed.

Any sexual assault is a very serious matter and should be referred to police and sexual assault support agencies.

The carers of a person with intellectual disability can help by modelling assertive behaviour, making referrals if the person needs further training or support, and explaining the basics of protective behaviours, including:

- Every person has the right to say what happens to their body.
- Everyone has the right to feel safe.
- There are laws that protect a person's right to live safely without being harmed or exploited.
- There are many people who can be trusted, but also some who cannot be trusted.
- Some types of behaviour are appropriate for yourself and others, but some types are not.
- You can communicate assertively and say “no” to unwanted behaviour.
- It is okay to change your mind about sexual behaviour or activity, even if you have already agreed to something.
- There are people who can help if you are being abused or exploited in any way.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Family Planning Victoria Tel. (03) 9257 0100 or 1800 013 952
- Yooralla Tel. (03) 9660 4500, TTY (03) 9916 5899
- Centre Against Sexual Assault (CASA) crisis line Tel. 1800 806 292
- National Sexual Assault, Domestic and Family Violence Counselling Service (Australia) Tel. 1800 RESPECT (1800 737 732, telephone counselling service operating 24 hours, 7 days)
- Office of the Public Advocate Advice Service Tel. 1300 309 337, TTY 1300 305 612
- Victorian Civil Administrative Tribunal Tel. (03) 9628 9900
- PapScreen Victoria Tel. (03) 9514 6100

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Things to remember

- People with intellectual disability can express their sexuality in satisfying ways.
- The attitudes and support of other people are essential in helping people of all abilities to have healthy personal and sexual relationships.
- Sexual abuse or exploitation is always wrong and should be treated as a very serious matter.

References

- When sex is not OK: a brochure for people with intellectual disabilities, South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault. More information here.
- Family Planning Victoria, 2012, Senate inquiry into the involuntary or coerced sterilisation of people with disabilities in Australia. More information here.
- Relationships and sexuality and people with disabilities, Indiana Institute on Disability and Community USA. More information here.

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Sexual health basics

- Contraception - condoms for men
  Condoms are the most effective way to reduce your risk of contracting a sexually transmissible infection (STI) during sex.

- Contraception - condoms for women
  The female condom is effective in preventing an unplanned pregnancy and protecting against sexually transmissible infections (STIs).

- Contraception - choices
  The method of contraception you choose will depend on your general health, lifestyle and relationships.

- Contraception - emergency contraception
  It is best to take emergency contraception as soon as possible, ideally within 24 hours of having unprotected sex, but it still works well within 96 hours (four days).

- Masturbation
  Masturbation is a normal and healthy way for people to explore their own bodies.

- Oral sex
  Oral sex is using your mouth, lips or tongue to stimulate your partner’s genitals or anus. Both men and women can give and receive oral sex.

- Safe sex
  Safe sex is sexual contact that doesn't involve the exchange of semen, vaginal fluids or blood between partners.

- Sex – are you ready
  It is normal to have mixed feelings about having sex with someone else.

- Sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
  It is not difficult to avoid catching sexually transmitted infections (STIs).
• Women's sexual and reproductive health (video)
Find out some facts about women's sexual and reproductive health - including fertility, contraception, menopause, parental consent and conditions (such as PCOS and endometriosis).  

Sexual relationships
• Partying safely and sex
Partying is fun but being out of it on alcohol or drugs can put you at risk of unwanted or unsafe sex.
• Safe sex
Safe sex is sexual contact that doesn't involve the exchange of semen, vaginal fluids or blood between partners.
• Sex – are you ready
It is normal to have mixed feelings about having sex with someone else.
• Time to immunise - free vaccines for men who have sex with men
Immunisation is one of the best ways you can protect yourself and others from infectious diseases in our community. In partnership with Thorne Harbour Health (formerly Victorian AIDS Council), the...

Women's sexual and reproductive health (video)
Find out some facts about women's sexual and reproductive health - including fertility, contraception, menopause, parental consent and conditions (such as PCOS and endometriosis).  

Sexuality and sexual identity
• Bisexuality
Bisexuality is when a person finds men and women physically, sexually or emotionally attractive.
• Family violence and the LGBTIQ communities
Within Australia, intimate partner violence is the most common form of family violence. Evidence presented to the Royal Commission into Family Violence suggests intimate partner violence is as...  

Gay male sexuality
There is no real explanation as to why some men are gay and others are not; it is just part of the wide variety of human sexuality.

Lesbian sexuality
Many women report they have lesbian experiences or feelings, but do not think of themselves as lesbians.

Men and sexuality
Sexuality is not about whom we have sex with, or how often we have it. Sexuality is about our sexual feelings, thoughts, attractions and behaviours towards other people. We can find other people...

Mental health and wellbeing support for LGBTI people
If you or someone you know requires support from an LGBTI or mental health organisation there are services available...

Sexuality explained
Sexuality is not about whom we have sex with, or how often we have it. Sexuality is about our sexual feelings, thoughts, attractions and behaviours towards other people. We can find other people...

Switchboard (Victoria)
The Gay and Lesbian Switchboard (Victoria) is a telephone helpline that gives advice, information, counselling and referrals to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex (GLBTI) people in...

Trans and gender diverse people
Your gender is what feels natural to you, even if it is different from your biological sex. Some people may not feel comfortable with their biological sex but choose to live with the gender with which...

Women and sexuality
Most girls start puberty around 10 years old, but it can be earlier or later than that. Your body will go through big changes as you change from a girl into a young woman. For some girls (and women)...

Sex education
• Sex education - tips for parents
Mothers are more likely to talk about intimate, emotional and psychological aspects of sex than fathers.

- **Talking to children with cognitive disability about sex**
  All people, including those with cognitive disabilities, have the right to explore and express their sexuality in appropriate ways.

- **Talking to pre-schoolers about sex**
  By four, most children are curious about certain sexual issues, and they need honest answers to their questions.

- **Talking to primary school children about sex**
  Some parents find it hard to talk with their primary age children about sex, but help is available.

- **Talking to young people about sex**
  Talking about sex with your child is easier if you start when your child is young.

- **Talking to young people with cognitive disabilities about sex**
  Young people with cognitive disabilities have the same range of sexual feelings and desires as young people without disabilities.

- **Women's sexual and reproductive health (video)**
  Find out some facts about women's sexual and reproductive health - including fertility, contraception, menopause, parental consent and conditions (such as PCOS and endometriosis).

**Sexual assault and abuse**

- **Date rape**
  Date rape can be especially common among young people who have had little sexual experience and aren't sure that what they have experienced crosses the line into rape. Many victims of date rape can.
Contraception - choices
The method of contraception you choose will depend on your general health, lifestyle and relationships.

Contraception - condoms for women
The female condom is effective in preventing an unplanned pregnancy and protecting against sexually transmissible infections (STIs).

Contraception - diaphragms
The diaphragm acts as a barrier method of contraception.

Contraception - implants and injections
Hormonal contraception for women is available as implants or injections that slowly release hormones into the body over time.

Contraception - injections for men
Contraceptive injections for men are not yet available in Australia, but clinical studies suggest that they may provide a safe, effective and reversible method of male contraception in the future.

Contraception - intrauterine devices (IUD)
An intrauterine device (IUD) is a small contraceptive device that is put into the uterus (womb) to prevent pregnancy.

Contraception - Louna's lowdown on emergency contraception (video)
This video was made by the Royal Women's Hospital in Melbourne, Australia, with Louna Maroun to inform teenagers about this safe, effective form of contraception to prevent an unplanned pregnancy.

Contraception - tubal ligation
Sterilisation is a permanent method of contraception that a woman can choose if she is sure that she does not want children in the future.

Contraception - vaginal ring
The vaginal ring works in a similar way to the oral contraceptive pill to prevent pregnancy.

Contraception - vasectomy
Having a vasectomy does not affect a man's ability to produce male sex hormones, enjoy sex or reach orgasm.

Pregnancy - unplanned
When a woman does not want to become a parent, her pregnancy options may include abortion or adoption.

Sexual issues throughout life

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

Menopause and sexual issues
Menopause, the final menstrual period, is a natural event that marks the end of a woman's reproductive years.

Physical disability and sexuality
Sexuality is a key part of human nature. Expressing sexuality in satisfying ways is important for everyone, including people with a disability. Some people with disability may need additional support.

Puberty
Adjusting to the many changes that happen around puberty can be difficult for both parents and young people.

Sex and chronic illness
Sexuality is a key part of human nature. Expressing sexuality in satisfying ways is important for everyone, including people with a disability. Some people with disability may need additional support.

Health conditions and sexual issues

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

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

Diabetes and erectile dysfunction
Men with diabetes are more prone to problems with erectile dysfunction or impotence.

- **HIV and men - safer sex**
  HIV transmission can occur from men to women and from women to men as well as between men who have sex with men.

- **HIV and women – having children**
  Women living with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), or women whose partner is HIV-positive, may wish to have children but feel concerned about the risk of transmission of the virus to themselves if...

- **HIV and women – safer sex**
  Practising safe sex is important, whether your partner is HIV-positive or not.

- **Parkinson's disease and sexual issues**
  Communication is the best remedy for all types of relationship problems, including sexual problems caused by Parkinson’s disease.

- **Physical disability and sexuality**
  Sexuality is a key part of human nature. Expressing sexuality in satisfying ways is important for everyone, including people with a disability. Some people with disability may need additional support.

- **Sex and chronic illness**
  Sexuality is a key part of human nature. Expressing sexuality in satisfying ways is important for everyone, including people with a disability. Some people with disability may need additional support.

- **Time to immunise - free vaccines for men who have sex with men**
  Immunisation is one of the best ways you can protect yourself and others from infectious diseases in our community. In partnership with Thorne Harbour Health (formerly Victorian AIDS Council), the...

### Abortion

- **Abortion services in Victoria**
  Some abortion services in Victoria offer reduced fees to students, healthcare card holders and those experiencing financial difficulty.

- **Abortion**
  All women should have access to accurate information about abortion so they can make their own informed decisions.

- **Abortion procedures - medication**
  Mifepristone, also called RU486 or the ‘abortion pill’, is used to terminate (end) a pregnancy up to nine weeks.

- **Abortion procedures - surgical**
  Abortion is one of the most common and safest types of surgery in Australia.

- **Contraception after an abortion**
  Whether you have a surgical or medical abortion you can become fertile again very soon after the abortion, so it's important to start using contraception immediately if you wish to prevent any.

- **Myths and facts about abortion**
  In Victoria, where abortion is available in a range of public and private settings, it is a safe, common and legal reproductive health choice.

### Related Information

- **A Healthy Start to School**
  A Healthy Start to School – a guide for parents of children in their foundation year of school.

- **No Jab No Play**
  No Jab No Play – from 1 January 2016, all parents/guardians seeking to enrol their child at an early childhood service in Victoria must provide evidence that the child is fully immunised for their age.

- **A Healthy Start to School**
  A Healthy Start to School – a guide for parents of children in their foundation year of school.

- **Autism spectrum disorder - tips for parents**
  Autism spectrum disorder is a lifelong condition, but you are not on your own and there are plenty of professionals and groups who can help.

- **Sex and chronic illness**
Sexuality is a key part of human nature. Expressing sexuality in satisfying ways is important for everyone, including people with a disability. Some people with disability may need additional support...

Related information on other websites

- 1800 Respect: National Sexual Assault, Domestic and Family Violence Counselling Service (Australia)
- Family Planning Victoria - Disability services
- Office of the Public Advocate
- Royal Adelaide Hospital, Brain Injury Rehabilitation Service – Sexual function
- Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal

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