

## Sexual Relationships after Heart Attack and Heart Surgery

Many people believe that having sex increases the chances of having a heart attack. This is a common myth. It is important to understand that sex is simply **another form of exercise**. Sexual activity is no more, and often a lot less, stressful to the heart than other daily activities. We place the same stress on the heart when **walking briskly up two flights of stairs or walking one mile on the flat in 20 minutes**. If you are able to do tasks such as these relatively comfortably, without pain or significant breathlessness, then participating in sexual activities should not be a problem. Like any exercise, sex will cause physical symptoms. This involves an increase in heart rate, blood pressure and may cause you to breathe a little faster. Following sex, you should expect your heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing to settle back to normal after about three minute's rest.

### Resuming Sexual Activity

- As you recover from a **heart attack** and return to normal activities, you should be able to return to the normal activity of sex. If you have doubts ask your doctor and use a stair, walking or treadmill test as your guide. The advice is the same whether the patient is male or female.
- After **heart surgery** you can resume as soon as you feel able. Chest wall pain can sometimes be a problem. It might be useful to experiment and find a position that is comfortable for both of you. There is no reason to avoid normal sexual activities following a bypass operation. The main problem may be pain from the muscles in the chest. If there are any problems do not avoid the subject, ask for help from your own doctor. Hairs on men's chests are prickly when they regrow and their partners may find this uncomfortable. A small soft pillow placed over the chest between partners can help.
- Following **angioplasty** you can typically resume sex within 2 to 3 days, depending on whether your groin is bruised or painful. Again, it may be useful to try alternative positions to become comfortable.

Sexual activity doesn't usually present a problem and is not harmful for patients with **heart failure**. As in all forms of exercise, breathlessness might limit what you can manage, so take advice if this occurs.

### Changes

Your desire or **interest in sex** can often be affected by your emotional well-being. Anxiety and depression are common following cardiac illness. One common part of depression is less interest in and/or enjoyment of sex. If this is a problem you should speak to a health professional or your family doctor. Medication can be very safe and effective in treating emotional problems. **Your sex drive may also be altered by your cardiac medication**. If this has happened, you should mention it to your cardiologist rather than accept it, they may be able to change your medication. Don't suddenly stop taking your medication as this can be dangerous.

**Male impotence can be a common side effect of some medications** including beta blockers, the diuretics, and, more rarely, the statins. If you have a problem developing or sustaining an erection, you should consult your doctor. It may be possible to change your medication or dosage, or your doctor may suggest additional medication for impotence. Viagra is now a well-recognised medication to improve this problem, helping approximately 8 out of 10 men who take it. Do not use Viagra without getting medical advice. **Viagra is safe if used sensibly, but should not be taken if you also take nitroglycerin**. There is no increased risk of a heart attack from Viagra.

Adapted by N Lock, PT from [www.nhsggc.org.uk](http://www.nhsggc.org.uk) – National Health Services Greater Glasgow and Clyde