

# sexual health & diabetes

**A healthy sexual relationship is one of life's expectations and pleasures. When things go wrong, whether or not we have diabetes, many of us find it hard to accept that there might be a problem that may need to be treated. It's important to know this isn't something you need to face alone as there is a great deal of available support.**

## Does diabetes cause sexual problems?

While most people with diabetes, both male and female, are able to lead completely normal sex lives, diabetes may contribute to sexual problems for some people. The most common problem is erectile dysfunction in men (also known as ED or impotence) which occurs when unable to get or keep an erection long enough for intercourse. Ejaculation may or may not be affected. Fertility remains normal.

## Is the cause of erectile dysfunction physical or psychological?

Most men have an occasional problem with erectile dysfunction. This can be caused by being tired, stressed, depressed or drinking too much alcohol. Some tablets may also cause erectile dysfunction, such as certain tablets used to treat high blood pressure, depression or stomach ulcers. It's important to always tell your doctor about any tablets you may be taking for other conditions. Men with diabetes may also lose their sexual desire for a time when their blood glucose levels are high.

## What actually goes wrong?

Reduced blood flow and nerve damage to the penis are generally the underlying reasons for erectile dysfunction. Often men with diabetes who have the condition also have other complications related to nerve damage or blood circulation problems, such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol or heart disease.

**The most common sexual problem associated with diabetes is erectile dysfunction in men. Much less is known about sexual problems in women although those with poorly controlled diabetes are more likely to have frequent bouts of thrush.**



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## How is erectile dysfunction treated?

Erectile dysfunction can be treated in a number of ways including tablets, mechanical devices and surgery. While tablets are easy, they may not work for everyone. So be sure to discuss options with your doctor or diabetes educator to decide what's best for you and your partner.

- a. Tablets eg: Viagra, Cialis and Levitra.
- b. Prostaglandin injection into the side of the penis eg: Caverject.
- c. Devices such as the vacuum pump.
- d. Surgery such as penile implants.

## Does diabetes cause sexual problems in women?

In general, much less is known about sexual problems in women and this includes women with diabetes. The main issues that women deal with are vaginal dryness, a decrease in sexual desire, pain during sex and trouble having an orgasm. Whether diabetes affects these problems is unclear although women who find it hard to come to terms with having diabetes are more likely to have sexual and relationship problems.

Women with poorly controlled diabetes are more likely to have frequent bouts of thrush (yeast infection). In most cases, keeping blood glucose levels under control will help.

During periods or menopause, some women need to change their insulin or tablet dosage. However, your doctor or diabetes educator will help during these times.

## How to deal with sexual problems

- 1. Accept that there is a problem:** Thinking it might go away will only delay treatment and probably make things more strained with your partner.
- 2. Talk to your partner about the problem:** Even with the most loving couples, sexual problems can cause a strain if you don't talk about them and share concerns in an open and loving way.
- 3. Talk to your doctor:** Sexual problems are the same as any other medical problem. Make an appointment for you and your partner to visit your doctor or diabetes educator to discuss your concerns and how it can be treated.
- 4. Learn about the condition:** Finding out as much as you can about the condition and its treatment will bring positive results for you and your partner and improve your sense of well being.

The design, content and production of this diabetes information sheet has been undertaken by the eight State and Territory member organisations of Diabetes Australia Ltd listed below:

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|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| > Diabetes Australia – NSW        | > Diabetes Australia – Victoria |
| > Diabetes Australia – Queensland | > Diabetes Australia – Tasmania |
| > Diabetes ACT                    | > Diabetes SA                   |
| > Diabetes WA                     | > Healthy Living NT             |

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