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## Helping yourself and your partner

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It is important to discuss with your partner the things you are finding difficult about engaging again in an intimate or sexual relationship, whether it is psychological or physical difficulties. Try to think of ways to work and resolve the issues together, such as:

- If fatigue and physical tiredness are affecting your sexual function, try prioritising your sexual activities or intimacy when planning your day. Such as having sex earlier in the day when you are less tired, planning fewer activities for that day so that you can preserve energy, trying different positions during sex to manage your energy.
- Maintain your independence and role in the relationship as much as possible. Make sure you do what you can for yourself and contribute to all duties of daily life. This will make you feel more confident in your abilities and maintain equality in the relationship.

Seek professional advice as needed if you feel you and your partner need more support navigating through this period. You may want to discuss problems ranging from: physical dysfunction; medication; and managing emotional and relationship support.

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## Useful contacts and services:

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- Family planning association (FPA): The Sexual Health Charity. Visit at: [www.fpa.org.uk](http://www.fpa.org.uk)
- The Stroke Association: Sex after Stroke. Visit at: [www.stroke.org.uk](http://www.stroke.org.uk)
- Different strokes: A leading UK charity for young stroke survivors. Visit at: [www.differentstrokes.co.uk](http://www.differentstrokes.co.uk)

This leaflet was developed by the Occupational Therapy Team on the Acute Stroke Unit at the Royal Berkshire Hospital.

To find out more about our Trust visit [www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk](http://www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk)

**Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.**

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**Royal Berkshire**  
NHS Foundation Trust

# Relationships and sex after stroke

This leaflet provides information to patients about physical difficulties, relationship changes and changes in self-image following a stroke

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## Physical changes and difficulties

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A stroke can physically affect a person in a variety of ways and these difficulties may cause changes to relationships, intimacy and sex.

Some common physical changes are:

- **Sexual dysfunction** such as erectile dysfunction (problems getting an erection) or decreased sex drive. Some medications prescribed for blood pressure and stroke prevention may cause your body not to perform as previously. It is important to raise these concerns with your GP or consultant as there may be medications that can be prescribed to manage these problems.
- **Physical changes** such as: muscle weakness and stiffness, pain, altered sensation, impaired mobility and incontinence, may make physical activity more strenuous or difficult.
- **Fatigue** and lethargy may affect your desire to engage in sex and intimacy. You may not feel that you have enough energy for sex due to tiredness from your daily activities.

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## Relationships with your partner

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Changes in your mood and emotions may affect your relationship with your partner. It is important to acknowledge that a stroke is a life-altering event and you and your partner may need support.

Some common relationship changes are:

- **Changes in roles** within the relationship may occur following a stroke. Your partner may take on a more active caring role such as supporting with personal care; medication management; emotional support and well-being. Likewise, you may now feel dependent on your partner and may experience a loss of purpose in the relationship. It is important to talk openly about these concerns within your relationship or to discuss with professionals.
- **Fear of further strokes.** A person may feel engaging in intimate or sexual behaviour may cause harm or damage. However, there is no evidence that sexual activities which elevate heart rate or blood pressure increase the risk of another event, so it is safe to take part in sexual activities soon after, unless otherwise informed by a professional.

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## Changes to yourself and self-image

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It is common for people to feel an altered perception of themselves following a stroke. Common difficulties you may experience are:

- **Changes with your body image** can negatively impact your self-confidence. The physical and sensory changes you may experience after a stroke can lead to a person developing a negative image of themselves and their body. You may feel your body is no longer your own, which may impact your desire to engage in sexual activity with your partner, as you may feel that you are no longer attractive and that you cannot perform during sex as you used to be able to.
- **Emotional and behaviour changes.** Many people experience rapid, often exaggerated changes in mood (known as 'emotional lability') that may decrease your interest in intimate or sexual activities. It is important to monitor feelings of low mood or depression and to seek professional advice as necessary.