

# Sexual health and diabetes

## A healthy sexual relationship is important for both men and women.

When things go wrong, whether or not you have diabetes, it can be hard to accept that there might be a problem. If you don't address sexual issues, this can impact on your emotions and intimate relationships. It's important to know that you don't need to face this alone – support and treatment are available.

### Diabetes and sexual problems for men

A man's fertility is not affected by diabetes. However, diabetes can sometimes contribute to sexual problems for men. The most common problem is erectile dysfunction (also known as impotence), when the man is unable to get or keep an erection long enough for intercourse.

When men have erectile dysfunction, ejaculation may or may not be affected. For men with diabetes, reduced blood flow and nerve damage to the penis can be the underlying reasons for erectile dysfunction.

Men with diabetes who experience erectile dysfunction often have other complications related to nerve damage or blood circulation problems. This can include high blood pressure, high cholesterol or heart disease. Men with diabetes may have a low libido and may not feel like having sex when their blood glucose levels are high.

## What else causes sexual problems for men?

Most men – with or without diabetes – will experience the occasional difficulty having an erection. Both physical and psychological factors can contribute to this, including being tired, stressed or depressed, or drinking too much alcohol.

Some medications can also cause erectile dysfunction, such as some tablets used to treat high blood pressure, depression or stomach ulcers. If you are affected, ask your doctor about the medications you are taking.



**Helpline 1300 136 588**

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## How is erectile dysfunction treated?

- » If you have erectile dysfunction, it's important to talk to your doctor or diabetes educator. While this may be a difficult topic for you to raise, they are used to talking about this and can help you get the best treatment. Seeing a counsellor with experience in sexual health may also help.
- » Often, the first and simplest step in treating erectile dysfunction is medication. However, this doesn't work for everyone, and you may need to see a specialist who can discuss other treatment options (such as mechanical devices or surgery).

## Diabetes and sexual problems for women

Some women with diabetes may experience sexual problems such as vaginal dryness, a decrease in sexual desire, slower than normal arousal, pain during sex, and trouble having an orgasm. You are also more likely to get thrush (a yeast infection), but if you manage to keep your blood glucose levels in the target range you will help to avoid this. Talk to your doctor or diabetes educator if you have any concerns about your sexual health.

Women planning to have a baby may worry about whether diabetes will affect their fertility. If you are in good health and have well-managed diabetes, your chances of falling pregnant should not be any different from those of a woman without diabetes.

Factors that do affect fertility can include your age, being overweight, and having polycystic ovarian syndrome. Talk to your doctor if you have any concerns about fertility.

## How to deal with sexual problems

- » Communicate openly with your partner about any sexual problems. Even with the most loving couples, sexual problems can cause a strain on the relationship if you don't discuss concerns in an open and loving way.
- » Make an appointment with your doctor or diabetes educator as soon as possible to discuss your concerns. You may or may not wish to take your partner with you. If you feel uncomfortable about raising the topic with your health professional, prepare what you would like to say beforehand. Seeing a counsellor with experience in sexual health may also help.
- » Be informed. Finding out as much as you can about your condition and management options can result in positive outcomes for you and your partner.



### More information

For general information about sexual health for men and women, go to:

[www.andrologyaustralia.org](http://www.andrologyaustralia.org)  
[www.jeanhailes.org.au](http://www.jeanhailes.org.au)

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The NDSS provides a range of services to help you manage your diabetes. These include our Infoline and website for advice on diabetes management, NDSS products and a range of support programs to help you learn more about managing your diabetes.

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