



# For Women: Diabetes and Sexual Health

Diabetes does not have to keep you from enjoying sex. If you are worried about your sexual health, there are many simple and effective ways to take care of yourself. Talk to your doctor or diabetes educator for their ideas and help.

Your sexual health can be affected by many factors. Here are some:

## Stress and depression

People with diabetes often feel more stress and may even become depressed. This can cause sexual problems. What's more, some medications used to treat depression can interfere with a woman's sexual feelings.

## Pressure and anxiety

It can be hard to find the time to relax and take care of your need for intimacy. The desire to please your partner can be another source of pressure. It may not be easy, but talking with your partner about what you feel and need sexually can help to lower your anxiety.

## Nerve damage

High blood sugar can damage the nerves and blood vessels, including the vaginal area. This can cause bladder problems, vaginal dryness, lower sexual interest, and make it hard to climax. Menopause can also cause these problems.

## Vaginal dryness

Increased dryness can make having sex painful or uncomfortable. Try to:

- Use a water-soluble personal lubricant, available at most drug stores. Don't use Vaseline or other oil-based products. They damage condoms and can lead to infections.
- Talk with your doctor or diabetes educator about an estrogen vaginal cream or hormone replacement therapy, especially if you are in menopause.

## Bladder problems

Leaking urine (incontinence) or not being able to empty your bladder completely can be the result of nerve damage. To prevent this, try to:

- Go to the bathroom every 1 to 2 hours. Don't wait until your bladder feels full.
- Urinate 30 minutes before and after intercourse.
- Practice Kegel exercises to keep the muscles around the vagina and bladder strong. (See sidebar.)
- Smoking can make bladder problems worse. If you smoke, talk with your doctor about quitting. We can help.

## Yeast and other vaginal infections

Women with high blood sugar tend to have more frequent yeast and other vaginal infections. Menopause may make this worse. You can help to prevent infections by:

- Washing the vaginal area daily in the shower or bath.
- Wearing cotton underwear
- Reducing or eliminating sugar from your diet may help.
- Eating low-fat or nonfat, plain or artificially sweetened yogurt (with lactobacillus cultures).

## Kegel Exercises

Kegel exercises are easy to do, and you can do them anywhere without anyone knowing.

- Sit or lie down.
- Contract the muscles you would use to stop urinating. (You should not feel your stomach or rear end tighten.)
- Squeeze for 3 seconds, and then relax for 3 seconds.
- Repeat 10 to 15 times per session.
- Try to do this at least 3 times a day. The more you exercise, the more likely it is that the exercises will help.



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- Starting treatment at the first signs of a yeast infection. Talk to your health care professional about over-the-counter creams such as *Monistat* or *Gyne-Lotrimin* for yeast infections; or 1% hydrocortisone cream to treat the itching. You can also call the Appointment and Advice line for more information.

## Hormones

It may be harder to control your blood sugar just before and during your periods because of hormone changes. Try to track your blood sugars on a calendar or blood sugar log to look for a pattern that shows you how your period affects your blood sugar levels. The hormone changes of menopause can also affect blood sugar control. And of course, your hormone levels can have a big impact on your desire for, or response to, having sex. Talk with your doctor or health care professional if hormone changes seem to be affecting your sex life.

## Emotional concerns

Diabetes may change your feelings about sex in many ways. You may:

- Feel like you spend all of your time and energy managing your health.
- Find it hard to relax and let go.
- Feel less desirable.
- Find that your body doesn't respond the way it used to.

- Be confused about what to share with your partner about your physical needs and fears.

Open, caring communication is the best way for couples to overcome any physical or emotional barriers to sexual health. It's important to find time for intimacy. Many women find that massage can help them feel more comfortable, relaxed, and in the mood. Others use regular exercise to relax and improve their self-image and overall health.

## What you can do

- Keep your blood sugar, blood pressure, and cholesterol in the best control possible.
- Stop smoking.
- Be aware of how much alcohol you drink. Drinking too much alcohol too often can affect your ability to enjoy sex.
- Talk openly with your partner about what you are feeling and what you want.
- Your doctor, diabetes educator, or other health care professionals know sexual health is an important part of your physical and emotional health. Talk to them about your concerns.

## Pregnancy

To plan for a healthy pregnancy while managing an ongoing condition such as diabetes, it is very important to talk to your doctor before you get pregnant. If you

take prescription medications such as statins for heart disease, over-the-counter medications, or herbal remedies on a regular basis talk with your doctor about whether or not they are recommended for use during a pregnancy. Changing your treatment plan or medication and making sure your diabetes is in good control, can make a big difference in ensuring that you and your baby stay healthy during pregnancy.

Some diabetes medications, such as *Glucophage* (metformin), may increase the chance of getting pregnant. If you don't want to get pregnant, discuss your birth control choices with your health care team.

## Other resources

- Connect to our Web site at [kp.org](http://kp.org). Here you'll find the Health Encyclopedia, which offers more in-depth information on this and many other topics. You can also search the Web site by typing your topic into the "search our site" box found on the upper right on any page.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, Healthy Living programs, and other resources.
- If you feel depressed or overwhelmed, consider taking a behavioral health education class or make an appointment with a behavioral health specialist. Call your local Health Education Center or mental health department to find out more about available classes.

This information is not intended to diagnose or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor. If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist.