

# SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS AFTER STROKE

Chest  
Heart &  
Stroke  
Scotland



ESSENTIAL GUIDE

# **This Essential Guide is about personal relationships and sex after a stroke.**

## **It explains:**

- how a stroke might affect your relationships with friends, family, and others around you
- how a stroke might affect your sexual and romantic relationships
- tips and tricks for helping your relationships after a stroke

# How a stroke can change relationships

After a stroke, a lot of things can change for you. This can affect your relationships with the people around you.

This might come from:

- Physical changes making you unable to do things you usually do
- Changes in how you communicate
- Changes in your emotional and mental state, or even personality
- Stress and trauma from your experience
- Difficulty expressing how you feel

This can have an effect on all your relationships, not just your romantic or family relationships.



# How will relationships look after a stroke?

Your relationships are unique and personal to you. It is impossible to predict how they will change as a result of a stroke, or what they will look like as time goes on.

This affects a range of relationships, such as:

- Intimate and romantic partnerships
- Friendships
- Parent-child relationships
- Family relationships
- Work relationships

Some common changes people report include:

- A change in responsibilities, such as how chores are handled in your house.
- Frustration and emotional strain, particularly if your stroke has affected your thought processes.

- Difficulty managing activities which you normally do with friends and family, like meeting for coffee or taking a walk.
- Trouble communicating.
- Fear, stress, and trauma for everyone involved, making it difficult to talk about the stroke.

Parenting can add additional challenges, like:

- Your child needing to take on extra, “adult” responsibilities.
- Trouble explaining the situation to a child.

CHSS has worked with Different Strokes, a youth charity, to develop illustrated booklets designed to explain stroke to children. You can order these online at

**chssonline.**

**paramountprinters.co.uk**



# The importance of communication

The most important thing you can do to support all of your relationships after a stroke is to ensure you are **open and honest** with each other.

A stroke can have a huge effect on not only you, but the people around you. You and the people around you will have to adjust to changes after your stroke.

This can be stressful and difficult for everyone, and it is important to give each other the space to manage the emotions that can come up.



Try to express how you feel and what you need as often as possible, and listen when other people share their feelings and needs with you.

If your stroke has caused communication problems, this can seem daunting. You can use a communication support book, communication app, or other communication aids.

It can also be helpful to read stories from other people who have had a stroke, and share them with friends or family. This may help you to express feelings or experiences you cannot find words for yourself.

You can also help yourself and the people around you by looking for support from a range of places and people. One of the greatest strains on relationships can come when a person feels that they have to be responsible for all of your struggles - spreading the load can be easier for everyone.

Counselling or therapy can be helpful, both for you and for the people around you who may be struggling to deal with your stroke.

# Finding alternative activities

One of the hardest changes to deal with after a stroke is the change to your schedule and what you can do.

This can make it difficult to maintain friendships and relationships with people outside your household.

It is important to look for alternative ways to build and maintain relationships - ways which are better suited to your ability and comfort after a stroke.

Consider meeting at a café or somewhere else with comfortable seating. Alternatively, you could invite people to visit you. Talking online or by phone may be easier than meeting in person, and can help you keep in touch with friends and family.



# Dating after a stroke

Dating after a stroke can be a scary thought. It may take a while for you to be comfortable meeting new people and dating, especially if you have lasting physical or speech problems.

It can be difficult to tell a new partner about your stroke. However, it is important to be upfront about any needs you may have, or difficulties that they may notice. If they are unwilling to work with your needs from the start, then it is unlikely to lead into a healthy relationship.

A stroke may make dating more difficult, but there are still plenty of people out there who will see past your stroke to connect with you as a person. Don't give up!



# How a stroke can affect your sex life

A stroke can affect your sex life or make sex more difficult in a variety of ways, including:

- Losing sensation in part of your body
- Struggling with the movements involved in sex, or with balance
- Difficulty communicating, which can make it difficult to tell someone when you do (or don't!) want to have sex
- Loss of sex drive (libido)
- Pain or tingling in parts of your body
- Erectile dysfunction, or difficulty orgasming
- Embarrassment or emotional difficulty

However, you can work around most of these issues, and many people still enjoy an active sex life after a stroke.

## Libido and sex drive

After a stroke, you may find that you want sex less often, or are less interested in sex.

This can be caused by changes in your brain, but it can also be affected by things like pain, anxiety, or fatigue. It is normal to feel less interested in sex when you are tired or otherwise uncomfortable.

Remember that you should never feel pressured to have sex if you do not want to. It may take some time for your sex drive to return to normal, or it may remain at its current level.

On the other hand, some people find that they have a higher sex drive after their stroke.

It is important to have open, honest conversations with your partner(s) about these changes and how you will manage them.



## Physical changes that can affect sex

Your stroke may have affected the way you experience sex in physical ways.

Loss of mobility may mean that it is difficult to have sex in certain positions, or that you lose your balance more often. This is sometimes worse when you are close to orgasm, or immediately after orgasming. Mobility changes may also make it more difficult to masturbate - using toys can help.

Loss of feeling, or changes in feeling, may affect what turns you on and how easy it is to find a comfortable position.

If you are uncomfortable or in pain, stop. You can either change positions, or take some time to recover and decide whether you want to continue.

It may take some experimenting to find out what works for you. This can be a good opportunity to explore the changes to your body together. Try to relax and have fun!

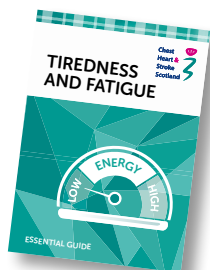
## Fatigue and energy

After a stroke, you may find that you get tired more easily. (See our booklet on **Tiredness and Fatigue** for more information on this)

Sex can be a very energetic activity, and you may find that you are unable to spend as long having sex as you used to. You may also find that after having sex, you are very tired the next day.

If this is the case, it is important to plan when and how you have sex. Allow yourself time to recover afterwards. This can feel awkward at first, but it will mean that you are able to relax during sex, knowing that you do not have to worry about any fatigue it might cause.

Fatigue can also make sex less appealing, or more difficult. If you find that this is a problem for you, discuss it with your partner.



## Communication around sex

If you have difficulty communicating - for example, if you have dysphagia or aphasia - this can make it hard to discuss what you want and what you enjoy. Make sure that you arrange beforehand how you will communicate, and that you have a way to tell your partner if you need to stop.

## Sexual dysfunction

After a stroke, you might experience some difficulty with sexual function, such as:

- Vaginal dryness
- Difficulty becoming aroused
- Erectile dysfunction

If you are having trouble getting or maintaining an erection, you can speak to your doctor for help. However, it is important that you **do not take medications such as Sildenafil (Viagra®) without speaking to your doctor**, as this can affect your blood pressure and make another stroke more likely.

## Fertility and contraception

A stroke is unlikely to affect your ability to get pregnant and carry a child healthily, or to reduce your fertility in general. However, if you are planning to have children, it is best to discuss this with a health professional first.

There is a small increased risk of stroke associated with using contraceptives that contain hormones (such as the combined contraceptive pill).

You may need to use alternative means of contraception to reduce this risk, so talk to your GP or family planning clinic about the best method for you.



## Ways to make sex easier after a stroke

Every relationship and every person is different. However, some things you may be able to try to improve your relationship and sex life include:

**Spend time together and try to plan for sexual activity in advance, just as you would plan for any other activity.** This may not seem very romantic at first but it can help to make sex more comfortable and enjoyable.

**Choose a time when both of you are feeling rested and relaxed and when you won't be interrupted.**

**Prioritise personal grooming,** as this may help you to feel more attractive and better about yourself. Wear clothes that make you feel good about yourself.

**Avoid heavy meals or a lot of alcohol beforehand.** Being full or drunk can make you more tired. Alcohol can also make it harder to get or maintain an erection.



**Find a comfortable position** which is supportive and easy to hold. Use products or cushions to support affected limbs.

**A urinary catheter does not have to get in the way of penetrative sex.** The tube can be taped out of the way of the vagina (be sure to use proper medical tape!) or held back over the penis using a condom. You can find more information about living with a catheter at: [healthtalk.org/living-urinary-catheter/sex-and-intimate-relationships](https://www.healthtalk.org/living-urinary-catheter/sex-and-intimate-relationships).

**Talk to your partner about your feelings.** Discuss any changes you need to make or problems you are experiencing.

**Explore alternatives to penetrative sex,** such as oral sex, using hands, kissing, etc.

**Consider using sex toys,** like vibrators, to provide new sensations and help with finding comfortable positions.

# Help and support

## Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland

The **CHSS Advice Line (0808 801 0899)**, or email **adviceline@chss.org.uk** can offer personalised support and information. The trained practitioners can also direct you to local support groups and specialists.

CHSS also offers a range of **booklets** on lifestyle changes, symptoms, and treatments which you may be experiencing. You can order these online: **www.chss.org.uk**

## FPA

This UK-wide charity offers information on all aspects of sexual health.

**www.fpa.org.uk**

**Tel: 0207 608 5240**

**Email: fpadirect@fpa.org.uk**

**Address:** Unit 12, Wetherby Business Park  
Wetherby Rd Derby. DE24 8HL

Call our Advice Line FREE on 0808 801 0899

## **LGBT Association**

This UK-wide charity offers information and support to LGBT+ people in all aspects of life.

**[www.lgbt.foundation](http://www.lgbt.foundation)**

**Tel: 0345 3 30 30 30**

**Email: [info@lgbt.foundation](mailto:info@lgbt.foundation)**

**Address:** Fairbairn House, 72 Sackville Street,  
Manchester, M1 3NJ

## **Relationships Scotland**

Offers couples counselling and family mediation services.

**[www.relationships-scotland.org.uk](http://www.relationships-scotland.org.uk)**

**Tel: 0345 119 2020**

## **Sexual Advice Association**

This patients' association specialises in sexual problems and sexual disorders, and their website has information on how to seek help.

**[www.sexualadviceassociation.co.uk](http://www.sexualadviceassociation.co.uk)**

Our publications are available for free to anyone in Scotland who needs them. Go to [www.chss.org.uk/resources-hub](http://www.chss.org.uk/resources-hub) for all our resources, including other Essential Guides in this series.

For free, confidential advice and support from our **Advice Line nurses**, call: 0808 801 0899 (Mon-Fri 9.30am-4pm), text: NURSE to 66777 or email: [adviceline@chss.org.uk](mailto:adviceline@chss.org.uk).

Across Scotland, over one million people – that's one in five of us – are living with the effects of a chest, heart or stroke condition. We are here to help everyone who needs us. But we need your support to do this. Go to [www.chss.org.uk/supportus](http://www.chss.org.uk/supportus) to find out how you can help more people in Scotland.

**If you would like this resource in an alternative format, please contact our Advice Line nurses.**

**Chest  
Heart &  
Stroke  
Scotland**



**NO LIFE HALF LIVED**

**E30** Published Apr 2023  
Next review due Apr 2026

Scottish Charity (no SC018761)