

# Diabetes & Your Sexual Health

More and more Americans are being diagnosed with diabetes each year. Despite the multitude of published research studies, and frightening headlines on magazine covers, like “Diabetes Now an Epidemic!”—the number of people diagnosed in the United States continues to rise. Many of the ad campaigns to try to help combat the issue seem to focus on obesity and how to eat healthier and exercise to manage this issue, all of which is good advice (though, it is of note that those diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes are insulin dependent, and would still need insulin, even if they maintained a regular exercise regimen and healthy diet). As for Type 2, I wonder if they would be more successful in getting people to monitor their sugar intake, exercise, and eat healthier, if they educated people about the common sexual problems diabetes can cause, for example: erectile dysfunction, decreased libido, difficulty with arousal, and difficulty achieving orgasms. Personally, I’d love for them to include that in their television commercials—and believe they should.

According to the American Diabetes Association (ADA), “25.8 million children and adults in the United States—8.3% of the population—have diabetes.” Both Type 1 (insulin dependent) and Type 2 (non-insulin dependent) diabetes can lead to problems with sexual functioning, for both men and women. One of the major reasons why so many diabetics experience sexual dysfunctions is due to diabetic neuropathy. Diabetic neuropathy is defined as, “damage to the nerves in the body that occurs due to high blood sugar levels from diabetes.” Over time, diabetic neuropathy causes a loss of feeling to the extremities, due to the nerve damage. I believe many people are familiar with the problems diabetics face in losing feeling in their extremities; however, I’m not sure many people have considered that it’s not just your fingers and toes that are affected!

The ADA reports 13 million, or 11.8% of all men aged 20 years or older in the United States have diabetes. Erectile dysfunction (ED) is the most commonly reported sexual dysfunction for men with diabetes, occurring in approximately 50% of the patients. This is due to the damage to nerves, arteries, and smooth muscle of the penis, caused by diabetic neuropathy. Other problems include a decreased libido, or desire for sex, and difficulty achieving an orgasm. In some cases, the problem is compounded by feelings of anxiety, embarrassment, guilt, or fear related to ED. Thus, in addition to the physical complications, many men also struggle with psychological factors, which in turn reinforce potential issues of ED. It can become a cycle after it happens once or twice. Fear and anxiety set in about it happening again—and thus, the cycle begins where the anxiety about it possibly happening causes it to actually happen. This is now a psychological issue on top of a medical issue, and treatment with medication alone has a very low success rate.

The ADA reports 12.6 million, or 10.8% of all women aged 20 years or older in the United States have diabetes. While there is more research available on sexual dysfunction in males than in females, more and more diabetic females are talking to their health care providers about problems with sexual responding. As noted by Roszler & Rice, “Both uncontrolled blood glucose levels and diabetes-related complications can play havoc with a woman's sexual desire and performance.” Below are some of the most common ways, according to Roszler & Rice, that diabetes can affect female sexual health:

- **Infections and irritation.** Chronic high blood sugars promote yeast infections and vaginal irritation.
- **Low blood flow.** Vascular damage caused by poorly-controlled diabetes restricts the blood flow to the vagina, which causes vaginal dryness and interferes with arousal.

- **Nerve damage.** Women who have neuropathy to the genital area, the reproductive organs, or the vagina may have difficulty achieving orgasm.
- **Neurogenic bladder.** Women with nerve damage to the bladder may have incontinence problems that make sex difficult and/or embarrassing. It can also make urinary tract infections (UTIs) more common, which may make sex uncomfortable.
- **Vaginismus.** Some women experience vaginismus, a tightening of the vaginal walls which can make penetration painful or impossible (2013).

## Tips for diabetics

If you've already been diagnosed with diabetes, and you're wondering what you can do to limit its effect on your sex life, here are some suggestions:

- ❖ **Talk to your doctor** about any symptoms you may have noticed. If you have already discussed this with your doctor, and it's been determined that you may be struggling with some psychological factors, seek out a mental health professional.
- ❖ **Control your blood sugar.** This will help to protect blood vessels, and prevent further nerve damage.
- ❖ **Have open and honest communication** with your partner. If they understand what you're dealing with, it is more likely that they will be able to be a positive support for you.
- ❖ **Exercise!** Research shows that exercise may help reverse some of the symptoms of diabetes. It also helps increase blood circulation and will increase blood flow to your extremities, including your genitals. Increased blood flow means increased sensation!
- ❖ **Buy some adult toys.** Due to the decreased blood flow caused by diabetes, there is less sensation in the genitals. For women, I suggest the Hitachi Magic Wand, as it is known to be one of the more strong and powerful vibrators (for external use only).
- ❖ **Restore vaginal pH.** If you're experiencing chronic vaginal infections, it may be because increased blood sugar levels can throw off the pH balance in a woman's vagina. Try an over the counter vaginal gel, like RepHresh, to help restore normal vaginal pH.
- ❖ **Choose the right lubricant.** Some lubricants actually contain some forms of sugar, like glycerin and propylene glycol. This can also throw off the pH balance in the vagina. I recommend using a silicone-based lubricant. One of my favorites is Pjur Eros Bodyglide (original).
- ❖ **Medications for men.** For men with ED caused by diabetes, the use of a pharmaceutical vasodilator, to open up the blood vessels and allow increased blood flow may be helpful. For example, Cialis, Levitra, or Viagra. Talk to your doctor to discuss which one may be best for you.

### Additional Resources:

**The Secrets of Living and Loving with Diabetes,** by Roszler, Polonsky, and Edelman.

**Sex and Diabetes: For Him and For Her,** by Roszler, Rice, and Elders

**Sex and the Diabetic: Erectile Dysfunction,** by B. Piepers

**Overcoming Impotence,** by Dole & Jones.

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