

TIPS FOR HEALTHY LIVING

Scleroderma and Sexuality

A chronic health problem should not re-define a person as an asexual being who has lost all interest in sex. A person facing and adapting to a chronic illness needs the love and comfort of a close, intimate relationship perhaps more than ever. But, this aspect of life is often not discussed.

One of the most difficult barriers to a satisfying sex life is the damage that illness does to your self-image and self-esteem. Many patients report that they feel unattractive as a result of Scleroderma. Changes in appearance, loss of hand function, weight loss or gain due to medications, and worries about pain, heart or lung function can interfere with your sexuality and view of yourself. This often causes some people to avoid sexual situations. They try “just not to think about it”.

Women, Scleroderma and Sexuality

- Physical problems for women with Scleroderma include:
- Fatigue,
- Vaginal dryness and,
- It's too cold, it's too hot, it's dark, etc.
- Physical discomfort during sex because of joint pain and decreased mobility.

Fatigue:

Fatigue is a frequent problem in Scleroderma that can seriously alter your sexual life.

Like any activity that is important to you, you may need to pace yourself and rest up to continue your sex life.

Vaginal dryness: Many patients with Scleroderma have dryness of mucous membranes. Symptoms include dry eyes and dry mouth. The vagina can also become dry, with less lubrication during arousal. This can make sex uncomfortable or even painful. Vaginal lubricants that can be bought in most drugstores are very helpful. It's important to look at other causes of vaginal dryness before blaming Scleroderma. Menopause and the drop in female hormones that goes with it can also cause vaginal dryness. If this is the case, estrogen replacement in a pill form or in a vaginal cream can be helpful.

Physical discomfort: Symptoms of reflux (such as heartburn) can be made worse by lying flat and by having the weight of a body on top. Some women find sex painful because they have trouble finding a comfortable position. Joints feel stiff and sore and don't move as easily as they used to. A warm bath may help. Being open to trying new positions or activities are also important.

Men, Scleroderma and Sexuality

Erectile dysfunction: Erectile dysfunction, or the inability to get and maintain an erection, is the most common sexual complaint from men with Scleroderma. There are several possible causes for this. The penis becomes erect when more blood is directed into it than is drained from it. The part of the nervous system that is responsible for this is called the parasympathetic nervous system. There is some evidence that sympathetic nervous system is damaged in Scleroderma. Vascular problems are common in Scleroderma. Damage to the blood vessels is what causes Raynaud's phenomenon, finger ulcers and high blood pressure. The blood supply to the penis can also be changed. Once damage to vessels or nerves happens it may not be possible to reverse it. Problems with erections can also be caused by medication side effects. Calcium channel blockers are often

used to treat Raynaud's phenomenon. These medications improve the circulation to the fingers but decrease circulation to the penis. Discuss the issue with your doctor before you stop taking medication.

Possible treatments

- Medications (e.g., Viagra) can improve the circulation and improve erectile dysfunction.
- Other treatments such as penile implants may also be helpful.
- You may want to discuss the alternatives with your doctor or be referred to a urologist.

Enhancing your Sexuality

- It is important to avoid any beliefs that there is only one "right way" to be sexually fulfilled. Here are some ways to help you improve sexual fulfillment.
- Try to set up a calm and relaxed atmosphere. Stressful or high emotional conversations may cause anxiety and are not helpful in having satisfying sexual activities.
- Find positions that are comfortable for both of you. There is no "right" way to have sex. Try to have open communication with your partner about what you like and want in the course of sexual activities.
- Avoid sexual activity when you feel really tired.
- Avoid sexual activity right after a big meal.
- Avoid drinking alcohol before sex.
- If you have trouble with sexual performance, check with your doctor to see if you are taking medication which may be causing this. Changes in dosage or switching to another medication may help.
- If fatigue is the problem, try resting up and planning for sexual activity.
- Stay as active as possible. Good physical fitness enhances sexual performance.
- If you are having problems with arousal, or loss of interest in sex, it may be due to depression. If treatment for depression does not improve the problem, you may want to consider consulting a professional experienced in sexual counseling.

http://www.hopkinsscleroderma.org/downloads/scleroderma_ed5.pdf