

Bladder and Sexual Health for Women with Paralysis

Why talk about the bladder in connection with sexual health?

It can be normal for all women, with or without paralysis, to have urine leak during sexual activity and during orgasm. This can be due to pressure on the bladder or other causes. Women living with paralysis can be at even greater risk of urine leaking during sexual activity because the bladder and pelvic floor muscles may be weak, which can allow for urine to be more easily expelled during sexual activity. This is because the muscles that make up the pelvic floor are also affected after paralysis. Most women with paralysis are not able to contract their pelvic muscles; however, depending on the woman's situation, pelvic exercises may increase muscle tone and the support provided by the pelvic floor muscles.

Anxiety/Fear about Incontinence During Sex

Sexual activity involves a vulnerability and heightened emotional involvement which requires relaxation and openness. These components of intimacy can cause anxiety and fear because bladder management can require a routine that is not always understood fully by those without paralysis. Many women have identified that catheterization, no matter the method, impacts their sexual self-esteem and confidence. Being open with your partner about catheterization and bladder management as a whole, can increase a woman's confidence and relaxation.

Bladder Management and Sex

Intermittent Catheterization: For those who use intermittent catheterization, it is recommended to empty the bladder immediately before and after sexual activity in order to prevent urine leaks and infections. It is also recommended that even if you typically reuse catheters, to use an unused, sterile catheter to empty your bladder after sexual intercourse to help prevent infection.

Suprapubic/Foley Catheterization: Both suprapubic and urethral (Foley) catheters can remain in place during sexual intercourse. To avoid trauma to the urethra, tape the catheter to the leg or the abdomen to help decrease tugging and pulling. It is important to note, blocking the outflow of urine from the bladder, even briefly, may cause autonomic dysreflexia and/or reflux (backflow) of urine to the kidneys.

Sexual Activity and Risk of UTI

Women in general are more prone to urinary tract infections (UTI) than men. During intercourse, it is believed that the physical movement may allow bacteria to more readily move from the outside skin into the bladder. For women with paralysis, bacteria may also move from the gut and/or be released from bacterial biofilms on a urethral catheter. It can be helpful to clean the genital area after intercourse to reduce the chance that bacteria ascends and multiplies in the urinary system. If post-coital (after sexual activity) UTIs become a problem for you, consider discussing with your health care provider whether you might benefit from an antibiotic taken after intercourse. It is important to note that preventative antibiotics are typically discouraged except in rare instances. Talking with a specialist such as a physiatrist (rehabilitation doctor) or urologist can help address specific concerns.

Bladder Management During Sex

- Hygiene: For those of us using wheelchairs, we sit more often than our female friends and family members, which can cause skin breakdown or pressure injuries (ulcers). Maintaining cleanliness by showering can help to prevent infections including pressure injuries of the skin and infections in the genital region. Remember to also check your skin regularly by using a mirror if needed, or have a caregiver assist you.
- Empty your bladder before intercourse if possible. In the heat of the moment, it's awkward to stop and say "hold on a second, I need to pee," but it will help prevent bladder accidents.
- Bowel accidents can also occur, so if possible, emptying your bowels prior to intercourse is recommended. If you have a specific bowel management program, stick to it as much as possible.
- Placing a pillow under your lower back can tilt the pelvis, releasing pressure off the bladder during intercourse.
- Communication is key, before, during and after sex. An open dialogue will help decrease embarrassment and create a greater understanding of your body.
- Accidents happen, so be upfront and open with your partner before sexual activity.
- Towels or medical pads can help prevent leaks on sheets and the mattress.
- Stay alert to your body's needs.
- Empty bladder after sex to decrease the risk of infection.
- Use wipes to clean vaginal area after intercourse.

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