

# Sexual health and diabetes

A healthy sexual relationship is important for both men and women.

When things go wrong, whether or not you have diabetes, it can be hard to accept that there might be a problem. If you don't address sexual issues, this can affect your emotions and intimate relationships. It's important to know that you don't need to face this alone – support and treatment are available.

## Diabetes and sexual problems for men

Diabetes can sometimes contribute to sexual problems in men. The most common problem is erectile dysfunction (also known as impotence), when the man is unable to get or keep an erection long enough for intercourse. Erectile dysfunction may or may not affect ejaculation. For men with diabetes, reduced blood flow and nerve damage can be the underlying reasons for erectile dysfunction.

Men with diabetes who experience erectile dysfunction often have other complications. This can include high blood pressure, high cholesterol or heart disease. Men with diabetes may have a low libido and may not feel like having sex when their blood glucose levels are high.

What else causes sexual problems for men?

Most men – with or without diabetes – will experience the occasional difficulty of having an erection. Both physical and psychological factors can contribute to this, including being tired, stressed or depressed, or drinking too much alcohol.

Some medications can also cause erectile dysfunction, such as some tablets used to treat high blood pressure, depression or stomach ulcers. If you are experiencing erectile dysfunction, ask your doctor about the medications you are taking.

Diabetes, as well as some diabetes medications, can increase the risk of genital tract infections.



## How is erectile dysfunction treated?

- » If you have erectile dysfunction, it's important to talk to your doctor or credentialled diabetes educator. While this may be a difficult topic for you to discuss, they are used to talking about this and can help you get appropriate treatment. Seeing a counsellor with experience in sexual health may also help.
- » Often, the first and simplest step in treating erectile dysfunction is medication. However, this doesn't work for everyone, and you may need to see a specialist who can discuss other treatment options (such as mechanical devices or surgery).

## Diabetes and sexual problems for women

Some women with diabetes may experience sexual problems such as vaginal dryness, a decrease in sexual desire, slower than normal arousal, pain during sex, and trouble having an orgasm. Women with diabetes are also more likely to get thrush (a yeast infection), but keeping your blood glucose levels in the target range helps to avoid this. Talk to your doctor or credentialled diabetes educator if you have any concerns about your sexual health.

Women planning to have a baby may worry about whether diabetes will affect their fertility. If you are in good health and have well-managed diabetes, your chances of becoming pregnant should not be any different from those of a woman without diabetes. It is recommended that women with diabetes plan and prepare for pregnancy 3-6 months before conception for the best outcome.

Factors that can affect fertility include your age, being overweight, and having polycystic ovarian syndrome. Talk to your doctor if you have any concerns about fertility.

## How to deal with sexual problems

- » Communicate openly with your partner about any sexual problems. Even with the most loving couples, sexual problems can cause a strain on the relationship if concerns aren't discussed in an open and loving manner.
- » Make an appointment with your doctor or credentialled diabetes educator as soon as possible to discuss your concerns. You may or may not wish to take your partner with you. If you feel uncomfortable about raising the topic with your health professional, prepare what you would like to say beforehand. Seeing a counsellor with experience in sexual health may also help.
- » Be informed. Finding out as much as you can about your condition and management options can result in positive outcomes for you and your partner.



### More information

For general information about sexual health for men and women, go to:

[andrologyaustralia.org](http://andrologyaustralia.org)  
[jeanhailes.org.au](http://jeanhailes.org.au)

For information about pre-pregnancy planning for women with diabetes, go to:

[ndss.com.au/diabetes-and-pregnancy](http://ndss.com.au/diabetes-and-pregnancy)

## The NDSS and you

A wide range of services and support is available through the NDSS to help you manage your diabetes. This includes information on diabetes management through the NDSS Helpline and website. The products, services and education programs available can help you stay on top of your diabetes.

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