

When Your Significant Other Has Heart Disease

One of the wake-up calls of cardiac illness is to know we need other people. Heart disease makes our closest relationships, to spouses and other intimate companions, all the more important to quality of life and prospects for recovery.

The disease also can put these relationships under pressure and test their ability to sustain intimacy. The spouse of a heart-attack patient walks a thin line in attending to the patient's needs. Babying patients can make them angry or anxious, leading them to believe they're sicker than they've been told. Doing too little can lead to feelings of abandonment.

Patients and spouses also have a lot on their minds; they need to share it to keep emotionally close and keep their spirits up. University of Iowa researchers have found evidence that new heart attack patients who were coping with their worries by hiding them from spouses tended to be even more distressed several months later.

Sexual intimacy could also suffer in the wake of a heart attack, especially if patients believe that resuming sex will bring on a new heart attack or sudden death. Depression and fear about performance can also interfere.

Temporary depression is normal, says the American Heart Association (AHA), but it can worsen any sexual problems that were present already (if the depression becomes chronic, of course, it needs to be treated). As for the fears about sex being dangerous for heart patients, the AHA says that is not true for most people.

After a heart attack, the AHA says, patients should check with their doctors first, but they should be able to have sex the way they did before, once they're well enough to walk around easily. They should talk to their doctors if they have chest pain during sex, have lost interest or are worried about having sex. In the case of heart failure, the AHA says most patients can continue sexual relations once their symptoms are under control. The AHA suggests these general guidelines for couples resuming sex:

- Choose a time when you're rested, relaxed and free from the stress brought on by the day's activities.
- Wait one to three hours after eating a full meal to allow time for digestion.
- Select a familiar, peaceful setting that's free from interruptions.
- If prescribed by your doctor, take medicine before sexual relations.

Source: Wayne Sotile, PhD, Herbert N. Budnick, PhD, American Heart Association

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