

## Sex is an ADL too: Relevance of Sexual Function in Physiotherapy Practice

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www.physioforwomen.com



- "Physical therapists provide treatment to restore function, improve mobility, relieve pain, and prevent or limit permanent physical disabilities of patients suffering from injuries or disease." US Department of Labor, Bureau of Statistics: *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2004-2005 Edition*. Washington, DC: US Department of Labor; 2004. Bulletin 2540.
- Physiotherapy treatment is geared towards restoring the ability to function and perform ADLs independently and painlessly
- Promote wellness

**Sexual health** is an integral component to overall wellness, and sexual relations are a valued human activity

Engaging in enjoyable sexual activity requires the ability to feel, touch, and move comfortably.



## Conditions affecting general and sexual function

- Arthritis/rheumatoid disease
- Chronic Pain
- Low Back Pain
- Orthopedic injuries
- Orthopedic surgery
- General surgery
- Cancer
- Neurological diseases (CP, Parkinsons, MS)
- Aging

## Physical issues affecting sex

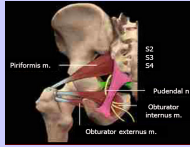
- Pain
- Decreased mobility
- Alterations in sensation (burns, RSD)
- Decreased circulation
- Decreased genital arousal which may involve musculoskeletal components
- Impact of disability or injury on self and body image and psychosexual implications

## PAIN inhibits sex

- Chronic Pelvic and Genital Pain
- Sexual pain disorders
- Dyspareunia:
  - Generalized and localized vulvodynia (VVS)
  - Postpartum dyspareunia
  - Postmenopausal dyspareunia
- Vaginismus
- Lower Urinary Tract Symptoms
- Interstitial Cystitis



## Musculoskeletal findings in pelvic and genital pain



- Decreased mobility, inflammation, or dysfunction.
- Shortened muscles of *iliopsoas*, *hamstrings*, *hip adductors*
- Decreased rib cage and abdominal motion/upper respiratory breathing.
- Ineffective excursion of the diaphragm
- Adverse neural tension
- Soft tissue tightness
- Pelvic floor hypertonus

## Chronic Pain

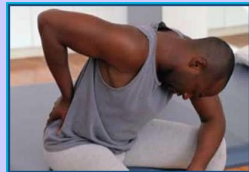


- Impacts work, family relationships, social activities and sexual function
- Depression, anxiety and anti-depressant medication
- Fibromyalgia - decreases in sexual frequency and interest (Baldini, 2003)

### Sex as analgesia:

- Relieves chronic pain (Kaplan, 1984)
- Relieves LBP (Shapiro, 1983)
- Vaginal/clitoral stimulation relieved pain (Whipple, et al 1988)

## Orthopedic Practice



- Injuries that may result from sexual activity, particularly in less active, mobile clients.
- Effect of limited knee, elbow or wrist ROM on ability to position self for sex: eg spinal stenosis must avoid extension position

### Books:

- 1) Sexual Positions for the Knee Patient Joanne Arczynski
- 2) Sex and Back Pain Lauren Andrew Hebert,

## Neurological

- Genital sensation/ general sensation (SCI)- impaired
- Orgasmic response -diminished or absent
- Reflex pulling together of the legs (adductor tone).
- General fatigue, depression, lack of desire
- Catheters, bowel and bladder issues

## Neurological

**Benefits:** Ejaculation and/or orgasm can decrease rigidity and improve muscle relaxation in women and men with musculoskeletal injuries or diseases — e.g., paralysis or MS (Halstead & Seager, 1991).

- [www.sexualhealth.com](http://www.sexualhealth.com)

## Geriatrics



### Older people having sex longer

Aging associated with:

- ↓ Mobility
- ↓ Taste, smell, see, feel
- Oral lovemaking may be affected by dry mouth.
- Touch- may be perceived as painful or irritating.



## Sex is beneficial to good health and improves QoL:

- Improves fitness
- Increases longevity (Persson, 1981)
- Protects against heart disease, stroke (Davey-Smith, 1997) breast cancer (Petridou et al, 2000)
- Bolsters immunity (Charnetski, 2001)
- Alleviates pain associated with arthritis, migraines (Ellison, 2000)
- Alleviates LBP (Shapiro, 1983)

## Why physical therapists ?

- 80 % of orthopedic surgeons reported they rarely or never discuss sexual activity with their patients who have had THR. Of those who did, 96 % spent five minutes or less on the subject (Dahm, Jacofsky, & Lewallen, 2004).



- Rehab focuses on function and quality of life



- Assess pre and post surgical sex function as part of rehab

## PT's attitudes towards dealing with patients' sexuality

Studies of attitudes of physiotherapists regarding sex:

- Lack of proper training to address issues of a sexual nature
- Embarrassment or hesitation to discuss sexuality
- Mistakenly assume that sexuality is not a concern due to advanced age, disability, or marital status.

Conine T. A., et al (1979) *Physical therapists knowledge of sexuality of adults with spinal cord injury*  
 Pynor, et al (2004) *A preliminary investigation of physiotherapy students' attitudes towards issues of sexuality in clinical practice*

## PT counseling

### PLISSIT Model

- P: Permission
- LI: Limited Information
- SS: Specific Suggestion
- IT: Intensive Therapy



- Specific exercises and positioning techniques designed to maximize the ability to enjoy sexual activity comfortably and painlessly

## Sexual positions for LBP

- Firm surface
- Pillows to support your knees and head.
- Rolled towel under lower back.
- Sturdy chair instead of lying down.
- Knees above hips
- Avoid swayback and twisting.



## Assisted devices



## How to ask the questions?

- Mention that the presenting condition may impact sexual activity
- *Ask* permission to discuss the topic
- *Give* permission to discuss the topic
- Listen
- Be direct, but appropriate with language
- Consider client's body language
- Feel personally comfortable or don't bring it up

## Suggestions



- Think out of the box: suggest sensual activities, touch, massage, outer-course
- Discover alternative erotic zones
- Suggest positions and assisted devices such as Harmony chair
- Refer to specialists: pelvic floor PT for pain with intercourse, urinary issues
- Refer to sex therapy: [www.itam.org.il](http://www.itam.org.il)

## Sexual Abuse

Important to be aware of prevalence

Handbook on Sensitive Practice  
Email : [tallir@netvision.net.il](mailto:tallir@netvision.net.il)

- Towards Sensitive Practice: Study explored experiences of sex abuse survivors who underwent PT
- Schachter et al Physical Therapy . Volume 79 . Number 3 . March 1999

## PT treatment facilitates:

- Greater self- awareness
- Self-confidence
- Improved body image
- Lowered anxiety
- Feelings of empowerment
- all of which encourage and affirm optimal sexual health



**Thank You !**