



Belfast Health and  
Social Care Trust

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## **Relationships & Sexual Wellbeing**

Amputee Rehabilitation Centre  
Regional Disablement Services

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## Introduction

Amputation affects lives in many ways. It is likely to have an impact on your physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing. It can also impact on body image, relationships and sexual wellbeing. Often amputees become anxious when talking to family and friends about their amputation. This can be due to fear of how others may react or perhaps because you avoid talking about it as it is still emotionally painful to you. At times others may also avoid talking to you about your amputation. This may be because they are worried about what to say, or fear of saying the ‘wrong’ thing.

## Body Image

Amputees often have to deal not only with how their body works and feels but also how it looks. The more you focus on what is missing – not just the limb, but also things that you were able to do before – the more likely it is that you become upset and angry.

It does not have to be this way. Most amputees are well adjusted and lead happy and full lives.

- Know that you are still the same person that you were before the amputation. It can help to think of yourself as a whole person who just happens to be missing a body part.
- Don't limit yourself with the label of 'disabled'. The focus should be not what is gone but on the future.
- Your body image is likely to change once you feel more comfortable with your prosthesis
- There are no definite rules when it comes to the question of 'limb off or on', do what feels right for you. Most amputees find that sexual intimacy is easier and more comfortable without the prosthetic limb. If this is the case begin with pillows



under the stump for comfort. If you feel too vulnerable without your limb, you can try leaving it on, or remove the limb but leave the liner/sock in place if this helps.

- Physical intimacy does not have to be about intercourse. Some couples gain more pleasure from manual/oral stimulation

## Sexual Wellbeing and Relationships

Relationships come in many forms and almost always improve the quality of our lives. Some amputees avoid relationships because they are so worried about their body image that they assume others will not like them..

This fear is seldom true

- Stay involved with those you already know
- Join an amputee support group where you can meet other amputees who lead full and happy lives
- Talk with important people in your life about your feelings of fear, anger and frustration. Your relationships are likely to be stronger after open and honest conversations like these

## Sexual Wellbeing

We are all sexual beings and sexuality is a unique part of who we are. It is a basic human emotion. It involves how you feel about your body and how you feel about physical contact with another person and yourself. Concerns about resuming or beginning sexual activity are very common following amputation and can be for all sorts of reasons.

- Fear of pain
- Fear of causing physical harm to yourself
- Fear of others reactions to you
- Unhappiness with your own body similarly, your partner may also have worries and concerns
- Fear of causing you pain
- Fear of behaving in a way that causes you upset.
- Lack of understanding about your physical ability/limitations

A common way of dealing with anxiety is to avoid. Avoidance means we never get the chance to prove that our anxiety is unfounded and instead fear becomes worse and the longer we avoid, the more difficult it becomes.

With sexual activity – this can mean that over time, avoidance can mean even a decrease in general physical contact, sometimes even a kiss and a cuddle.

Many couples lead happy, full and contented lives without sexual relationships. If, however you would like to make changes, sexual difficulties can be solved with time, commitment from both partners and good communication.

The next section outlines some of the strategies that might be useful for you and your partner to think about. If you are unable to solve any difficulties, we have listed supports available to you at the end.

- Sexual interaction may be slightly different than before amputation due to changes in physical mobility, or pain
- It may take time and creativity to find sexual positions and techniques that you are both happy with
- Open honest communication is vital. This includes discussing any worries you have in advance. Give each other feedback on what is enjoyable and comfortable, or not

- Work on your own feelings of comfort with your stump. Spend time touching and massaging it to help with this process.
- Encourage your partner to also become comfortable with your stump. Some amputees find it helpful to introduce their partner to their stump in a nice bubble bath so this can lessen the impact of seeing the amputation site/scar/wound
- There may be circumstances, perhaps where an individual has other complex medical conditions, where advice from medical professionals should be sought

## Hints and Strategies

Finding the most comfortable position for yourself and your partner may take time and you will need to experiment. There are no specific physical positions that are recommended. Do what feels right for you.

- If you worry about falling, provide adequate space. Lie in the middle of the bed, or alternatively on a comfortable, space on the floor. Use pillows for balance or extra support. Make sure you protect vulnerable skin with pillows etc.
- You might want to set some 'goals' initially, regarding what you want to do. You might, for example wish to spend time simple re-establishing physical intimacy via cuddling, kissing rather than intercourse.
- If you feel your fitness has decreased through being in hospital, then pace yourself and set time limits. This will improve stamina

## Further Reading and Sources of Information

If you should decide as a couple to seek further support with general relationships/sexual issues, RELATE is a well established national counselling service for helping couples with such difficulties.

**[www.relateni.org](http://www.relateni.org) Tel. 028 9032 3454**

Alternatively speak to your GP who will be able to help you with a referral locally to an appropriate service.

### Self Help

'Life and Limb' Lewin A, 1996, Plasma Print.  
Chpt 12

'Living with Physical Disability and Amputation'  
Fisher K, 2009. Sheldon Press, Chpt 10

**[www.changingfaces.org.uk](http://www.changingfaces.org.uk)**

A charity for people and families whose lives are affected by conditions, marks or scars that alter their appearance.

The Rainbow Project: promoting the health and wellbeing of lesbian.  
[www.rainbow-project.org](http://www.rainbow-project.org)

We hope that this leaflet has been of some help to you. If you have any further questions please feel free to contact us.

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