

Low Sexual Desire

10 tips for maintaining sexual activity



Symptom Management



Alberta Health
Services

Have you had a loss in your desire for sex since your cancer diagnosis or during your cancer treatment? This is very common after illness or stress. Loss of sexual desire is also more common as we get older.

Even though you might feel less interested in sex, maintaining sexual activity with your partner may still be important to you.

This booklet has many ideas that may help improve your sexual desire, or maintain your sexual activity even with loss of sexual interest. You may find that some of them fit your lifestyle and values, while others do not. If you like, try one or two ideas to get you started.



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1

Stimulate your sexual appetite

Have you ever had a time when you weren't hungry and didn't feel like eating? The idea of eating a big meal when you are not very hungry can be a bit much. But sometimes, our appetite comes as we eat. Eating an appetizer might make you want to eat more, or you might want to eat several different appetizers instead of a big meal.



Sexual activity can be the same - kissing, cuddling and touching may lead to more activity, or sometimes we enjoy these activities by themselves. The more you take part in these activities the more they may get you thinking about intimacy and closeness. For example, having a kissing session one day might get you thinking about sexual activity the next day and could strengthen your sexual desire.

A man with erectile dysfunction, or a woman with vaginal pain, may enjoy some kinds of sexual touch but be overwhelmed by others. Many people still enjoy sexual pleasure without reaching orgasm.

2

Increase your physical affection

If you and your partner aren't as sexually active as you used to be, you may find that you need to make more of an effort to touch each other in a non-sexual way.

Ideas to help increase your non-sexual physical affection:

- Put your arm around your partner
- Touch your partner's face, back or arm
- Cuddle close on the couch or bed
- Hug
- Kiss
- Hold hands
- Give each other a massage



Non-sexual physical affection can:

- Release hormones in your body that help you feel close and connected to your partner.
- Have a powerful calming effect on your body.
- Help your partner feel loved and prevent them from feeling rejected.



Good sex can be planned. Think about how you feel when you look forward to a planned holiday. Planning time for sex can also bring you the same excitement.

Some tips for planning:

- Choose one evening or one morning a week.
- Sex in the morning is often best since you may get tired as the day goes on.
- Planning helps because you don't have to rely on your body to remind you.

Here are just a few ideas to help set the mood:

- Put on some favorite music and dance together
- Take a bubble bath together
- Massage each other
- Spend time holding each other
- Enjoy long kisses
- Spend time touching each other sensually



These activities are to help you and your partner feel more connected physically. They may not, and do not need to lead to sex.

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Take turns initiating sexual activity

Try taking turns with your partner. In a relationship, there is often one person who does most of the initiating. Changing the role of who initiates sexual activities can help take the pressure off you and your partner.



It may be different to become the initiator of sexual activity. For the person who used to initiate, being invited may be new. For this change in roles to work, you and your partner need to be clear about your expectations.

How can we make our expectations clear?

- Ask each other what feelings you have when you think about inviting each other to be intimate
- Remove the expectation that any intimate activity must lead to intercourse

You probably already know that exercise keeps your body healthy, and improves your mood and over-all well-being. But did you know that exercise can also help with your sexual desire?

Exercise gets the blood flowing through your body. The blood flows to your pelvic area and genitals which keeps these tissues healthy.



Certain treatments such as pelvic surgery, pelvic radiation therapy or chemotherapy, can decrease sexual desire or sexual arousal because they can slow or prevent good blood flow to the genitals. Blood flow increases with sexual arousal, so keeping healthy blood flow in the genitals is important.

What types of exercise should I do?

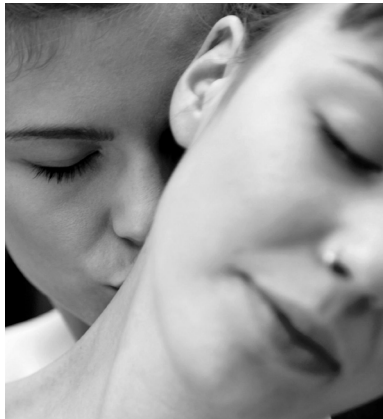
Any exercise that raises your heart rate will help. Find something that you like to do such as:

- swimming
- walking
- jogging
- biking
- aerobics
- tennis
- hiking
- skating

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Explore sexual fantasy

Sometimes it can be hard to focus on sexual desire and pleasure when there are so many other things going on in your life. Fantasy can help you focus your attention and be creative. You can choose to use it alone or with your partner.



Remember you choose your fantasy - think of positive, and sensual fantasies. They may be sexual, or may be more romantic in nature. Both are acceptable.

Let yourself fantasize!

- How you use fantasy is up to you.
- It is a normal and natural activity.
- Experience or re-experience pleasurable or exciting situations, and behaviours.



Before looking for materials, ask yourself:

- What are your beliefs about erotic material?
- What experience have you had with erotic material?
- Do you have any negative or positive thoughts about erotic material?
- Do you have fears about what your partner might think of you if you suggest exploring erotic material?
- Are you willing to explore to discover what you like best?

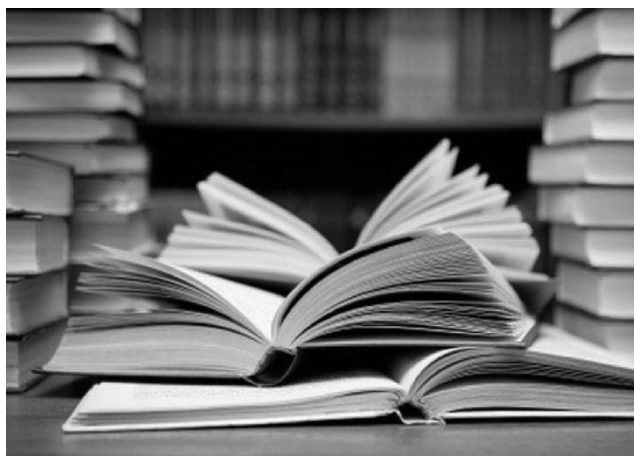
Tips on ways you can start:

- Think back to something you found really enjoyable and use that as a starting point.
- Explore things you haven't before, such as new locations, or pretend you have a different identity, or that you are a character in a story or movie.
- Imagine trying something new. Think about what the experience will be like. This can help you plan for when you are actually ready to give it a try.
- Start a fantasy journal. Write about the activities you most enjoy and the fantasies you find most arousing.

If fantasy is new for you, check out some erotic written material in your local bookstore or library to get you started.

Look for these or similar titles:

Lonnie Barbach —The Erotic Edge
Nancy Friday — My Secret Garden



Erotic material may set the mood and help increase your sexual arousal. You may decide to explore with your partner, or maybe you're more comfortable trying it by yourself at first. Erotic material can come in many forms such as:

- movies
- short stories
- music
- art
- fiction books
- poetry
- magazines
- educational programs or books

If you're worried about erotic materials being too graphic, there are plenty of steamy sexual scenes in many Hollywood movies these days. You may find this a nice introduction to visual erotic materials.



There are also written erotic materials online or in your local book store in the Self-help, Psychology, and Sex or Love sections.

Kegel exercises or pelvic floor exercises can help increase your sexual pleasure and orgasm because you learn to control and strengthen the muscles in the pelvic area. If you're doing these exercises daily, you'll also be more aware of the movements and sensations of your genitals which can make you more aware of signs when you're aroused. This will help you be more aware of your body and strengthen your mind-body connection.

How to do Kegel exercises

1. Identify the muscles in your pelvis that you use to stop the flow of urine or prevent passing gas.
2. Try clenching and letting go of these muscles. For a woman it may feel like she is contracting her vagina. For a man, it may feel like he is pulling his testicles up.



3. Make sure you aren't just flexing your abdominal or stomach muscles.

4. Try to hold for 2 or 3 seconds, then let go of this tension and let the muscles fully relax.
5. Repeat this exercise 10 times.
6. Do 5 sets of 10 repetitions each day.

Tips:

- Do short and controlled contractions to start
- Control is more important than the length of contraction
- After a week, try to add 1 or 2 seconds more to each contraction
- Eventually, try to hold the contraction for 8 to 10 seconds



If this exercise is difficult for you or if you have a history of problems with your pelvic area such as vaginismus or urinary incontinence, talk to a pelvic floor physiotherapist. For information on finding a physiotherapist near you, visit: physiotherapyalberta.ca.

If you are not very motivated to maintain sexual activity, you may still want to be close and physically connected with your partner.

What can you do together to help develop your sensual side?

- Wear silk pyjamas
- Use scented oils or incense
- Dim the lights and use candlelight
- Cuddle with each other
- Order in your favorite foods
- Watch a romantic or erotic movie
- Dance in your living room
- Read each other a story
- Listen to your favorite music
- Massage each other's backs, feet, or head
- Share a bath together



