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# Sexuality and Spinal Cord Injuries

If you have experienced damage to the spinal cord, you may wish to ask some questions about sex – **“Can I still have sex?”** or **“can I still have children?”** are just some of the questions that we are frequently asked.

Spinal cord injury (SCI) does not affect our need for being physically close to another person. The simple acts of holding, kissing, touching are as important now as they ever were.

You will receive information and advice regarding sexuality and how spinal cord impairments can affect the way you function sexually.

## Relationships

We understand that your body image, confidence and self-esteem may have been greatly affected by your spinal cord damage and subsequent paralysis. This is not unusual and can lead to many challenges. If you are in a relationship, fears may arise about your partner not wanting you or not being attracted to you now, and if you are not in a relationship you may have concerns about finding a relationship that will be satisfying to both you and a potential partner.

These are all common fears, but it is important to remember the success of any relationship is in how these fears are communicated. Communication between yourself and your partner is very important and we encourage you to keep the lines of communication open.

## What happens to sexual function after SCI

For both men and women, sexual function may now be a different experience from what it was prior to spinal cord damage. The extent of this depends on the amount of physical sensation changes you have experienced and the loss of muscle function within the genital area.

Erogenous areas above the level of injury, such as the back of the neck or ears, may be very sensitive to touch. If this is the case for you, communicate this with your partner.

Erectile function (erections) are controlled and maintained by intact nerve stimulation from centres within the brain. In males, for intercourse to be effective, sometimes assistance may be necessary through medication or sexual aids. Fertility may also need to be enhanced by assisted ejaculation and retrieval of sperm for use in an IVF (intro vibro fertilisation) programme.

In women, fertility does not change after SCI damage, therefore if children are not desired then contraception should be used.

If pregnancy does occur, it is important that a doctor with experience in spinal cord damage manages the care requirements associated with pregnancy.

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Depending on your level of injury, areas of your body may not be able to move the way they did before your injury. Through experimentation you will discover which positions work for you and your partner, and which positions don't. Pillows can be used to support you in a position to make things more comfortable or more erogenous.

For further information, refer to the 'Sexuality' section within the FSH patient care manual, which can be accessed via [www.spinalwa.org](http://www.spinalwa.org)

There is also a Spinal Sexual Rehabilitation Consultant based at Fiona Stanley Hospital. Inpatients can be referred via the Spinal Unit, or if you are no longer an inpatient a referral from your own GP is required.

The **Spinal Cord Injuries Australia** website can also provide further information.

<http://scia.org.au/sci-resources-and-knowledge/health-and-sci-facts/sexuality-and-fertility-and-sci>

## Contact

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### State Rehabilitation Service

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*This document can be made available in alternative formats on request.*

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