

Sexual Intimacy and Interstitial Cystitis

Five fundamentals of Sex:

1. Sex should not hurt.
2. Sex should feel good.
3. Sex should occur when and how *you* want it.
4. Sex should be a part of a healthy relationship.
5. Sex should not be the centerpiece of a healthy relationship.
(Goldstein, A., Pukall, C., & Goldstein, I., *When Sex Hurts*)

Sexuality – *how we experience and express ourselves as sexual beings*

Sexual Functioning – *what we do as sexual beings* (Katz, Anne (2009) *Woman Cancer Sex*, p3-4.)

Intimacy - *a close, familiar, and usually affectionate or loving personal relationship with another person or group.* (dictionary.com)

Sexuality and intimacy are important parts of what connect us in the most personal way with other persons.

There are many variations in the way people express themselves sexually, and there is no actual “normal” that refers to everyone. Chronic health conditions like Interstitial Cystitis (IC) that can cause pain or discomfort, make it even more difficult to maintain an intimate and/or sexual relationship. Touch is the most basic part of intimacy and an important part of bonding with your partner. Research has shown that touch may also help ease chronic pain.

The various symptoms of IC can make sexual intimacy a challenge. Both men and women who have IC may experience pain with or after intercourse. The fear and anxiety of impending intimacy can cause an aggravation of IC symptoms resulting in even more difficulty with a positive sexual response. How you think about sex and how you feel about sex are important to understand; sometimes it takes a professional counselor to help you identify these thoughts and feelings.

The most important way to keep IC from affecting your intimate relationships is to get control of your IC symptoms to begin with. As with any disease, understanding IC is key to controlling it rather than letting IC control your life. Furthermore, communicating with your partner and involving your healthcare provider (physician, nurse practitioner, or physician’s assistant) will be helpful in maintaining the healthy level of intimacy you want in your relationship.

Planning ahead, adjusting your sexual techniques, and managing your expectations are important aspects of a healthy intimate relationship in persons with IC. Below are some suggestions of ways to help with this:

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Anticipate intimacy and plan accordingly:

- Start with the basics: hugging, kissing, and talking. Foreplay is critical for the body to prepare physically for satisfying sexual functioning.
- Involve your healthcare provider if you might benefit from treatment prior to intimacy. A bladder instillation, trigger point injection, oral medication for relaxation, or topical medications for numbing may help.
- Avoid your known dietary triggers when you are anticipating intimacy – in fact, you may find an empty bladder and stomach to be helpful.
- Experiment with products and activities prior to their use when you want to be intimate. New lubricants, dilators, and sexual toys may need to be tested in a non-sexual way prior to introducing them when expectations for results are high.
- Adjust the goal – perhaps touch and connecting with your partner should be the ultimate goal of intimacy rather than orgasm.
- Try manual or oral stimulation when penetration is not an option. Simultaneous masturbation (both parties masturbating at the same time) can be very stimulating and sexually satisfying.
- Abstinence is not your friend, it may make matters worse to avoid all intimate contact completely.
- Limit duration and intensity - increasing time gradually as tolerated
- Try alternative positions. Lying side-by-side or with one partner standing to avoid pressure on the abdomen may be less aggravating to the bladder.
- Lubrication, lubrication, lubrication. There are many options on the market. Silicone or oil based lubricants tend to last a bit longer. Olive oil or coconut oil are two natural options.
- Communication, communication, communication. Talking with your partner about your physical and emotional feelings are important. Sometimes it is helpful to involve a counselor, particularly a certified sex therapist.

“...sex is a lot like pizza. No matter how bad it may be, it is still pretty good.”

“... [but] poor sexual pleasure can throw a wrench in your relationship dynamic.”

Laura Berman

Real Sex for Real Women

“To decide you won’t be a physical partner because you don’t feel like it is like his deciding that there will be no more conversation in the marriage because he’s not a talker.”

Harriet Lerner, PhD

Marriage Rules: a manual for the married and the coupled up

References:

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- Katz, Anne (2009) *Woman Cancer Sex*, Oncology Nursing Society.
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- *Sex and IC*, (2013) Interstitial Cystitis Association, pamphlet.