



Intimacy, Sexuality and Dementia

- What is sexual health?
- How does dementia impact intimacy and sexuality?
- How does caregiving impact intimacy and sexuality?
- What are some strategies to address sexual behaviours?
- How can intimacy be maintained?

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Sexuality and Health



HealthLink BC, 2018

- Connection, intimacy, and affection contributes to wellness and quality of life.
- Adjustments may be needed as people age to accommodate for physical limitations, behaviours and effects of medications or illnesses, such as dementia.
- People with dementia can continue to have a healthy intimate life with their partner for many years.

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Dementia and Sexual Expression

- Dementia is a brain disorder which can change how the person expresses their wish for companionship and intimacy.
- The person with dementia may express their desire for intimacy in different or unusual ways.
 - They may become more open about or interested in sexual activity, or become less affectionate.
- Sexual behavior may become more unpredictable and harder to understand as the disease progresses.
- It is important for care partners to understand that these changes in behaviour are common and that the person with dementia may not be aware that their behaviour has changed.

[Alzheimer Society of Canada, 2018](#)

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Changes in Intimacy

- Intimacy may also be impacted by:
 - **other physical illnesses**, such as arthritis that can limit movements and cause pain or discomfort, or diabetes, which can cause erectile dysfunction
 - **decreasing levels of hormones with age**
 - **depression and apathy**
 - **side effects of medication** such as erectile dysfunction or reduced sex drive caused by drugs that treat high blood pressure or that affect brain function

[Kaplan & Berkman, 2019](#)

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Dementia and Sexual Behaviours

- Dementia can cause some changes in sexual behaviours such as:
 - less control over urges due to changes in the brain
 - disinhibition including impulsivity, abrupt mood swings, verbal outbursts or inappropriate sexual behaviours
 - uncharacteristic language or display of anger due to discomfort or hunger
 - disrobing because of tight clothing, an overheated room, the need to use the washroom or disorientation of time and space

[Alzheimer Society of Ontario, 2013](#)

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Intimacy and Caregiving

- As partners take on more of a caregiving role, they may:
 - have less sexual feelings
 - have less of a desire to be physically intimate and feel guilty about this
 - become very focused on care tasks
 - not know how to respond to unwanted sexual behaviours
- As the needs of the person with dementia and their partner change, some couples may discover different ways of sharing closeness, comfort and intimacy.
- It is important to find ways to stay intimate and maintain a close relationship.

[Alzheimer Society of Canada, 2018](#)

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Ways to be Intimate

- As a relationship changes, consider the following ways to maintain intimacy:
 - explore handholding, hugging, kissing as well as more private forms of expression such as sexual touching, masturbation or intercourse.
 - talk openly in order to maintain an emotional connection
 - change expectations from the relationship
 - do things together and continue to enjoy each other
 - make new rules – things may be different in the relationship, but look for ways to stay connected.
 - asking for help – talk to a health care provider, psychologist, counsellor, or social worker or attend a caregiver support group

[Alzheimer's Association, 2018](#) ; [Alzheimer Society of Canada, 2018](#)

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Strategies for Sexual Behaviour

- If a person with dementia is exhibiting sexual behaviour that is not normal for them:
 - ignore the behaviour, if it is appropriate
 - provide privacy and stay calm; do not judge or scold
 - distract with activities that suggest comfort
 - change their wardrobe
 - look for unmet needs such as being lonely, bored, hot, cold or needing to use the washroom
 - if the person goes into other people's beds at night offer them a body pillow to cuddle in bed or provide a stuffed animal or a hot-water bottle wrapped in a towel

[Alzheimer Society of Canada, 2017](#)

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Medications

- Sexually inappropriate behaviour with agitation may respond to medications.
- Medications can also help with:
 - physical and verbal aggression
 - anxiety and restlessness
 - sadness, crying, anorexia, insomnia and other symptoms indicative of depression
 - withdrawal and apathy
 - sleep disturbance
 - wandering with agitation and or aggression
 - persistent delusions and hallucinations
 - elation, pressured speech and hyperactivity (manic-like symptoms)

Seeking Companionship with Someone New

- In some circumstances the person may no longer recognize or remember their partner, and may seek companionship and physical intimacy with someone new.
 - This may happen when the person with dementia is meeting new people in a Day Program or living in a retirement home or a long term care home.
 - If possible, staff should talk to the person with dementia and their new partner to ensure that they have both given consent to the new relationship.
 - Family members and staff may find this upsetting and try to prevent the person with dementia from forming intimate relationships with someone other than their partner.
 - Counselling and ongoing support should be offered, as adjusting to the change in relationship may be very emotional.

Key Points to Think About

- Older adults desire and need physical and emotional connection and closeness.
- Sexuality and intimacy are part of a fulfilled life.
- Sexuality may change with aging because of physical and mental changes.
- Older adults should be supported in engaging in intimacy and sexuality in order to have their desires and needs met.
- Relationships may change with aging, but there are many ways to be intimate and close with someone you care about.



Reflection...Intimacy and Sexuality

As a person with dementia or a caregiver, think of your own situation. How might you improve intimacy and connection?

Talk to your partner

eFit eLearning Course Handout



You Have Completed the Intimacy, Sexuality and Dementia eLearning Course!

For more information on this and other topics, please visit our [eFit Resources for Individuals & Caregivers on www.sagelink.ca](http://www.sagelink.ca).

We appreciate your feedback. Please contact info@sagelink.ca if you have suggestions, comments or have any questions.

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