



Getting *help for* Sexual Problems

***M*any persons** in methadone maintenance treatment (MMT) have sexual problems, also called sexual dysfunction. If you are concerned about this, you are not alone.

Usually, these sexual difficulties can be improved by getting help during an ongoing recovery program in MMT. This brochure offers some advice and encouragement.

How common are sexual problems?

Some surveys have found that nearly 9 out of 10 men and women entering MMT programs have sexual difficulties of one sort or another.

Some persons have sexual problems that started before their involvement with drugs. For many others, the problems developed along with their drug abuse and addiction.

However, sexual problems are often a well-kept secret, rarely discussed.

What are the problems?

Every person should be able to experience intimate relationships with a partner and enjoy sex.

Yet, both men and women coming into MMT programs may experience a lack of sexual desire, or an inability to perform sex or achieve orgasm.

Women may have irregular periods, or none at all, and be unable to get pregnant. Sexual intercourse may be painful. Men may have difficulty getting an erection, called impotence, or suffer premature ejaculation.

What are the causes?

Sexual problems may have physical, emotional, and/or drug-related causes.

Some drugs of abuse – like cocaine, alcohol, heroin, marijuana, and others – may at first seem to enhance sex for some people, but the drugs end

up ruining both sexual desire and performance. One reason is that many of those drugs upset the delicate balance of chemicals in the brain and body, called hormones, that control normal sexual function.

Making matters even worse are the anxiety, depression, fear, guilt, and daily stress of a drug-abusing lifestyle. Some persons, especially women, may have been sexually abused either as children or adults, which can later lead to sexual problems.

Physical illness also can cause problems. Obviously, when you are not feeling well it is difficult to have an active, enjoyable sex life.

How can an MMT program help?

During ongoing participation in MMT, by not using illicit drugs or alcohol, your general health should get better. Body functions, including sexual functions, typically improve.

Furthermore, over time, hormones in the brain and body can return to a more normal balance. Interest in sex and sexual performance may automatically increase as a result.

Today, there also are new medications and treatments that can help overcome sexual difficulties in both men and women. These can be prescribed by your doctor after a thorough evaluation of the problem.

However, there is still a need to deal with the emotional side of sexual problems. Learning to achieve intimate and satisfying relationships with a sex partner can take many months of hard work. Participating in groups and individual counseling at your MMT clinic can assist you in addressing these concerns and in locating other helpful resources.

Does methadone affect sexual problems?

Methadone has been used for more than 30 years as a treatment for opioid addiction. During all that time, it has not been found to create sexual problems when taken in adequate doses and exactly as prescribed. Methadone itself also is not a cure for such difficulties.

Many prescribed medications can have individual side effects causing sexual difficulties in some per-

sons. These medicines usually can be changed or the doses adjusted to eliminate most or all of these effects – if you tell your doctor about the problem.

Unfortunately, many persons in MMT programs are embarrassed to talk about their sexual problems. Rather than suffering in silence or trying to find a solution on your own, you should try to overcome any embarrassment and ask for the help that is available.

*W*hat should you do?

If you aren't enjoying sex as much as you would like, talk about it with a trusted member of your clinic staff, such as a counselor, nurse, or physician. Remember, they are there to help you – if you let them.

Here are some other things to keep in mind:

- **Talk to your doctor before stopping or reducing doses of prescribed medications that you think might be causing sexual problems.**
- **If you believe your methadone dose is affecting your sexual performance, discuss this with clinic staff.**
- **Never take any unprescribed drug – such as a stimulant (for example, cocaine), heroin, alcohol, herbal remedy, or over-the-counter product – thinking it will improve your sex life.**
- **Be patient. Years of drug abuse and emotional turmoil leading to sexual problems will not be quickly overcome.**
- **Dropping out of MMT will not solve any sexual difficulties or improve relationships with a sex partner.**

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For further information on addiction and recovery issues, visit the *Addiction Treatment Forum* website at www.atforum.com.

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