

Huntington's Disease Association



Sexual Problems and HD

May 2012

It is by no means inevitable that people affected by Huntington's disease and their partners will have any sexual problems at all. Many couples continue to have a mutually satisfying relationship for a long time and adapt to circumstances in a way suited to both partners. However, it is not uncommon for people to experience difficulties in the area of sexual relationships.

It is a subject many people find difficult to discuss with their families or friends, and embarrassing to mention to their doctors or other professional helpers. Every individual situation is different, and we are not going to try to give easy answers but rather to explore some of the problems we know people are facing and to see what or who could help.

Physical Problems

Difficulty in obtaining or retaining an erection

There may be a medical cause for this which should be checked through with your doctor. If the problem has only occurred since drugs have been prescribed – or changed – then this could well be the cause. Again check with your doctor.

Difficulties because of choreic movements

Some people have had problems maintaining intercourse because of the involuntary movements. It may be helpful to use a different position so that the affected partner is stable and well supported. Couples will probably need to experiment to find out what is the most successful position for them.

Psychological and Emotional Problems

One of the features of HD is the lessening of normal inhibitions. This can also be true of sexual behaviour and some people with HD may become sexually over-active. In an acute form it may mean that these persons will solicit a number of other people but much more commonly they make extra demands on their partners. These demands may be quite inappropriate as to the time and place, and can be very exhausting for the partner either in meeting them or standing the consequences of refusal.

The person themselves may well be feeling quite seriously depressed, frightened, isolated and unloved. One of the ways he or she can try to fight these feelings is by gaining reassurance through physical closeness and therefore sex. The overpowering need may cause excessive demands which the partner simply cannot meet. Refusal may be seen as rejection.

As the needs of the person increase, there may well be a diminished interest by the partner. Someone with choreic movements and behaviour problems may become unattractive in the eyes of the spouse and sexual contact an ordeal rather than a pleasure. Many partners feel very guilty about this, blaming themselves for what are quite natural reactions.

There are no easy answers to any of these problems. In cases of acute sexual over-activity there are drugs available. However they can have side-effects and should only be used when really necessary.

If it is at all possible the couple should try to discuss their problems between themselves, or with the help of a counsellor, so that they can understand each other's feelings. Extra attention and affection may reduce the need for actual intercourse, although some people have found that this has the opposite effect, and any physical contact is misinterpreted. As said before, a person with

Huntington's disease may need a great deal of reassurance and may easily feel rejected. A caring and affectionate attitude should help, together with an acknowledgement of some of the feelings the person may have.

Because of the confused feelings on both sides, some partners have felt that the only way they can manage is by very clearly ending all sexual relationships. This may mean separate beds or even separate rooms and may be a distressing decision to have to take because it is indicative that the previous marital relationship has come to an end. If the physical side of the relationship is intolerable to them, then this may be a way they can continue to give affection and practical care.

This information sheet is an initial effort to reassure people that difficulties are due to the illness but it is also aimed at gaining more information about the problems people are facing and the ways in which they have dealt with them. Although the subject can be a difficult and embarrassing one to raise it is important you speak to a health care professional if you are faced with these difficulties.

Fact sheets available from the HDA

The HDA provide fact sheets about all aspects of Huntington's disease. All fact sheets can be downloaded free of charge from our website www.hda.org.uk or ordered from Head Office.

For a publication price list/order form, membership form, details of our Regional Care Advisers and local Branches and Groups, please call Head Office on 0151 331 5444 or email info@hda.org.uk

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