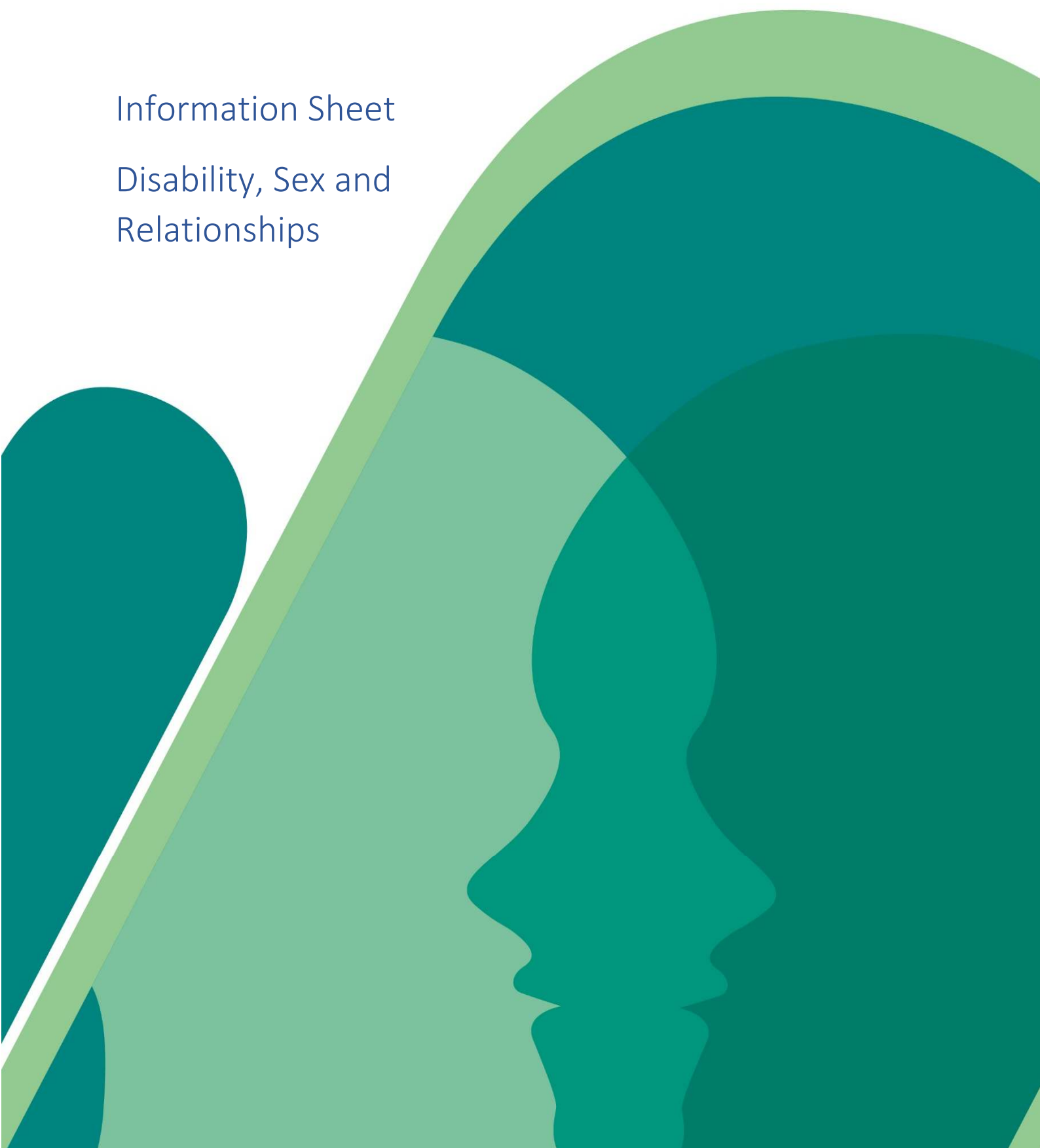




Information Sheet

Disability, Sex and
Relationships



Disability, Sex and Relationships

Having a physical or intellectual disability doesn't change sexuality, the desire to express it, or the emotions that can go with it. In fact, the World Health Organization says that sexuality is a basic need and aspect of being human that cannot be separated from other aspects of life.

If your disability impairs your physical ability to engage in a regular sex life, or makes you lack confidence, you may feel worried about having sex. Lots of people – with or without a disability – have anxiety about sex and sexual performance, and these feelings are completely natural.

Concerns about sex

A disability may affect your ability to have a regular sex life – you may have to approach sexual activity differently, and you may have questions and concerns relating to your physical or emotional health.

For example, you may feel:

- Worried about finding a partner.
- Worried about whether your partner will find you attractive.
- Lacking confidence about sexual abilities or performance.
- Concerned about how your body moves or works.
- Anxious over your partner's feelings about you.
- Fearful over pain during sexual activity.
- Worried about what others will think, and about discrimination.

It's natural to feel frustrated or worried about the effects of disability on your sex life. It may help to try to accept that you and your partner may have to approach sex differently and find new or different ways to satisfy each other. But if your feelings about your disability and its effects on your sex life feel overwhelming, try to talk to your doctor or another healthcare professional.

Your doctor can advise you on your unique situation – like whether you need relationship counselling or a medical aid for sex, or ways to support your body during sex. If your doctor can't help, they may be able to refer you to a specialist who can answer your questions and allay your fears.

It may also help to learn as much as you can about your disability and about sex. Masturbation or sex aids may be useful for you, for example.

Social myths and discrimination

Society has many myths, and the ones around disability and sexuality are frustrating, offensive and incorrect. Some of these myths include that a person with a disability doesn't need sex or can't have 'real sex'. Some other misguided notions include that a person with a disability has more important needs than sex, or should not have children.

On top of this, many able-bodied people tend to regard sex for people with a disability as a taboo subject and rarely discuss it openly. Society tends to have an idealised image of 'sexually attractive' and anyone – whether with a disability or not – who doesn't meet the standard can feel diminished or dismissed.

Information about disability and sex tends to focus only on function or fertility, and not on perfectly natural feelings and emotions, like attraction, desire and love. To be seen as a non-sexual being can be devastating.

If myths and misinformation are affecting your life, you may feel tempted to avoid sex or limit your opportunities to have sex (such as avoiding meeting a partner). When a lack of privacy from carers or living arrangements is involved too, you may find sex to be particularly challenging or concerning.

Emotions and Psychology

Whether you have a disability or not, you know how important love is to you. If you're a carer or friend or partner of a person with a disability, be aware of how important it is to express your love or care.

If you're not in a relationship, the most important thing to remember is you are not defined by your disability or your illness. You are a person who desires and loves like anyone else, and you have a right to it.

If you're in a relationship and dealing with issues around your disability and sexuality, these tips may help:

- Communicate – openly discussing your feelings and concerns is the best way to solve problems together. State your needs clearly, not only around intimacy but everyday life too
- Research – learn all you can about your condition and what it means for your life. Having plenty of knowledge may make you more comfortable talking to your doctor about sex too
- Get help – if the problems seem bigger than you and your partner, consider counselling. Sometimes it helps to get an outside perspective
- Look out for one another – If your partner is your carer, watch for depression in them. It's natural to feel sad, but depression is more than sadness and will need to be addressed. And watch general health as well. Carers need support and respite
- Acknowledge your 'new normal' – if you acquired your disability, from an accident or chronic illness, for example – try to accept that your relationship may be forever changed by your disability, and see whether you can come up with a new 'normal' for you both
- See friends – staying socially connected may help you to feel more positive about life
- Tackle stress – money issues, new divisions of labour and family responsibilities can cause a lot of stress. Try to address these issues so they don't affect your life, including your desire to be physically intimate
- Consider kindness – doing something nice for your partner every day can help to build intimacy and loving feelings.

Enjoyment

It takes energy to participate in and enjoy sex, so your disability may get in the way of your sex life to some extent. Factors that may limit your ability to be sexual include:

- Pain – pain, especially chronic pain, can certainly make you feel less like sex, but if you can distract yourself with sexual pleasure, you may find it helps ease the pain.
- Fatigue – sex can feel like just another burden when you're fatigued or chronically fatigued. If there are times in your day when your energy levels are better than others,

consider engaging in sex then. Or take it slow and easy: sex doesn't have to be physically active.

- Mental state – if you're not feeling positive, or you're suffering from anxiety or depression, you are unlikely to feel like sex. Talk to your doctor or a counsellor about your feelings, and seek help for your depression.
- Medication – medication can affect your sexual interest, thoughts and moods. Talk to your doctor about your concerns. Read more about how to talk to your doctor.

Contraception

You have the right to make your own informed choices about the method of contraception you use, but your disability may narrow the range of contraception options available to you.

Sex education

A child with a disability needs sex education as much as a child without a disability. In addition to a general sex education approach, sex education for a child with a disability should also cover:

- The fact that people with a disability can have fulfilling sex lives.
- Sexual issues that may be associated with their disability.
- Social rules such as public and private behaviours, and personal boundaries.

Sex education for a child with an intellectual disability should be delivered in a way that the child can understand.

If you're a parent of a child with a disability, it may be helpful to have appropriate information about puberty, menstruation (a disability doesn't affect when a girl starts menstruating) and sexual relationships on hand for your child.

Children and teenagers with an intellectual disability, such as that associated with autism, may need longer to get used to the idea of the changes that come with puberty. You can help them by preparing before puberty starts (from age eight to 13 in girls, and nine to 14 in boys).