

Diabetes behind closed doors

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Diabetes doesn't disappear when you dim the lights with your partner. Developing intimate relationships is supposed to be a natural thing, but type 1 diabetes can be like a third person in your relationship, and is often uninvited. These issues aren't often talked about in the clinic, especially by teenagers who are grappling with intimacy for the first time in their life, but don't know who to ask. Online forums for people with type 1 diabetes are resorted to for information on managing diabetes around intimacy. Reassuringly, data suggests that young people with diabetes are having just as much sex as everyone else.

There are limited data for healthcare professionals on what the main intimacy issues there are for people with type 1 diabetes. However, there are a few things that are known, and could be discussed with a member of the diabetes team that you trust. Both men and women with diabetes have high rates of anxiety around intimacy, and this isn't surprising as blood glucose levels affect libido and performance, and activity during intimacy affects blood glucose levels. This can spoil the moment, or spontaneity. This makes it important to have talk openly to your partner about how diabetes can affect your ability to be in the mood and stay in the mood, so that they can understand.

External diabetes technologies (insulin pumps, and continuous glucose monitors), have the potential to get in the way. In fact, about a quarter of people who don't use insulin pumps say that concerns around intimacy is one of the reasons that they didn't want to use an insulin pump. In reality though, the term "you've got to take it off, to get it on" is a practical solution to stop the pump from tangling. Just remember to reconnect and consider a temp basal!

There are treatment options for the common issues that some patients with type 1 diabetes have with intimacy (erectile dysfunction, vaginal dryness, and thrush). Your health care professional can give advice and treatment. When it comes down to it, an understanding partner is best for managing the third wheel in your intimate relationship! I encourage you to have an open discussion with a member of your healthcare team that you trust if you have any concerns regarding intimacy.

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