

What is sexuality and sexual health?

Sexuality is an important part of your life. It includes your gender identity, sexual orientation, intimacy, body image, feelings of attraction, and many other factors that make you a sexual being.

Sexual health includes a person's physical, emotional and mental well-being. It can change and develop over your life.

Each person expresses sexuality in his or her own way.

Some ways to express sexuality are hugging, kissing, cuddling, having intercourse or masturbating. It is important to look after your sexual health along with your physical and mental health.



Contacts for Sexual Health Information

Sexual health information is available through the Public Health and Social Services 905-528-5894 and the website: www.myhamilton.ca – click on the Public Health and Social Services tab at the top. There is information on sexual health programs and clinics, free condoms, birth control, the community health bus and much more.



STD and Anonymous Testing:

- Hamilton General Hospital
- 237 Barton Street East, Hamilton, Ontario
- 905-546-3541

Contact for other information

Talk to a member of your health care team or visit the patient library.

There is also a lot information on many health topics available from Public Health and Social Services.

Healthy Sleep

It is important to sleep well. Here are some helpful hints:

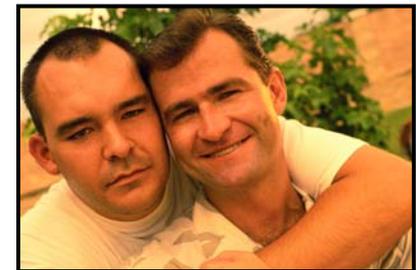
- Make your sleeping environment comfortable – not too hot or too cold, with little light and noise.
- Avoid caffeine within 7 hours of sleeping.
- Avoid smoking within 4 hours of sleeping.
- Avoid drinking alcohol within 2 hours of sleeping.
- It helps to get up every day around the same time even on weekends or days off.
- Regular exercise each day also helps your body need sleep. It is often hard to sleep if you exercise just before bed so plan to exercise earlier in the day.
- Try cutting down or stopping caffeine, alcohol and cigarettes. If you would like help with any of these, talk to your health care provider. There are many ways to help.



What do some of these words mean?

Here are some definitions to help you understand the words in this booklet:

- Gender identity is a person's sense of identification with the male or female sex. Gender identity may be seen in the person's appearance, behaviour, and other parts of a person's life.
- Sexual orientation is the direction of a person's sexual interest toward members of the same, opposite, or both sexes.
- Intimacy is the extent that a person is involved in a close, personal or sexual relationship.
- Body image is a person's ideas of his or her own physical appearance based on self-observation and the reactions of others.



How do sexuality and mental illness go together?

When you are diagnosed with mental illness, it is common to have concerns about how the illness may affect your sexuality.

Some symptoms of the mental illness may affect your sexual health. For example, you may have:

- increased sexual desire – feeling more sexy or want to have sexual relations more often
- decreased sexual desire – having little or no feeling of being sexy or wanting sexual relations
- psychotic symptoms such as hallucinations – for example you may hear a voice telling you that your body is ugly and not worthy of others to look at



Eat Healthy and Exercise

There are many benefits of eating healthy and exercising:

- improves your mood
- helps control weight so you look and feel better
- helps prevent health problems such as heart disease and diabetes
- gives you more energy
- helps you meet and talk to people and
- helps improve your sex life



Follow a balanced diet. Follow Canada's Food Guide. For a copy call: 1-800-267-1245 or go to: www.healthcanada.gc.ca/foodguide

Try walking, swimming, hiking, yoga or tai chi.

Talk to a member of your care team to help you get started.



Preventing having a sexually transmitted disease:

This is called safer sex. This means you use condoms to prevent catching a sexually transmitted disease (STDs) such as syphilis, gonorrhea, and HIV/AIDS. You can learn more about how to use a condom when you talk to your treatment team.

Preventing having a baby:

- Does being pregnant affect my mental illness?
- What forms of birth control are there?
- What is the best birth control for me?

Planning on having a baby:

- What do I need to think about if I want to have a baby?
- Can being pregnant affect my mental illness in any way?



Some medications you take to manage your symptoms may also affect your sexuality.



Some medications cause:

- decreased sexual desire
- problems having an erection
- problems having an orgasm
- delayed ejaculation
- weight gain so you do not feel sexy

Some people with mental illness lack self-confidence and find it hard to keep a positive sexual image. When a person feels badly, it is hard to feel sexual.



People with mental illness sometimes feel that they lack knowledge and education about sex. Some feel they have limited sexual experiences and miss out on opportunities to express their sexuality in a meaningful way.

Many people find it hard to talk about all of these issues.

There are many myths about sexuality and mental illness.

Some people believe...when you have a mental illness you cannot be sexual.



The truth is...intimacy and normal sexual feelings are important for a person with mental illness – the same as for any person.



Some people believe...sexual activity slows down recovery.



The truth is...having a sexual life if you desire this helps recovery. Some people feel fine with no sexuality in their lives. Other people feel much better when they can share love and be loved.



Reproduction:

- What are the physical differences between men and women?
- What is semen?
- What is the difference between semen and urine?
- How does a woman get pregnant and how does a man make a woman pregnant?
- Where does the penis actually go?
- Does it hurt a woman during intercourse?
- What is a virgin?
- How do you prevent getting pregnant?
- How do you prevent getting a sexually transmitted disease such as syphilis or HIV?



Dating:

- What do you do on a date?
- How do you get ready for a date such as personal hygiene, dating skills etc.?
- How do you attract someone to go out with you?
- When do you tell someone you like that you have a mental illness?
- How do you tell someone you like that you have a mental illness?



Some people believe...sexual activity can lead to developing schizophrenia or other major mental illness.



The truth is...this is not true.

There is no research that shows that sex leads to mental illness.



Also, many people with mental illnesses have meaningful relationships and live sexually satisfying lives.

What can you do for your sexual health?

There are many things you can do for your own sexual health. The next few pages give you some ideas.

Talk about sexual health with your treatment team

Talk to your treatment team. Talking about your sexual health is just as important as talking about medications, goals, housing, transportation and a job. Add this to your treatment program discussions so it is easy to talk about.

When you have a question or issue come up, you will be able to talk about it easier. Do not wait until you have a problem. Talk about things such as:

- How you are managing sexually when you are alone
- How you are managing sexually when you are with a partner
- If you have a problem, what you think the reason for this is

Talking helps find solutions and helps prevent future problems.

Gain knowledge about sexual matters

Many people do not have the correct information about sex.

Some examples are:

- You may have been raised in a home where loving and affectionate relationships may not have been demonstrated.
- If you were diagnosed with mental illness as a teenager, you may not have been able to develop sexual habits at the same time that your friends did.
- You may be missing basic information about males, females, how babies are made, and how to prevent making a baby.

Pages 9 to 11 give some sample questions that some people have asked and talked about during treatment. You may also want to talk about this type of information.

Your treatment team can help you gather the correct information.