



Sex When You Are Horny & Disabled

A story appeared about a 22-year-old man with cerebral palsy who has virtually no control over his body's movements. He started using his wheelchair antisocially, as a ramming device. He was running over anything he could. Eventually, this young man wrote on his word-board that he was so horny he couldn't stand it anymore. Although his body has the same sexual urges and desires as an able-bodied 22-year-old, he has no ability to walk, talk or masturbate like other 22-year-olds. He can't even download porn or surf adult websites.

As quickly as they began, this young man's wheelchair tantrums stopped. The reason? A nurse's aide mercifully began giving him hand-jobs. But then she was caught and fired instantly. The board-and-care home threatened to file a complaint against her for sexual abuse.

Sexy & Disabled?

If you think you are fair-minded about sexual matters, consider a quadriplegic who wheels by in an electric wheelchair. The person drools a little and steers the chair with a joy stick that's strapped to his forehead. Do you think of this person as being sexual? Do you think he has the same sexual needs and desires as you do? Chances are you'd wonder how good his jump shot is before you'd think of him as being just as horny as you are.

Many people not only disapprove of sex for the severely disabled, but find the concept offensive. They might even feel that we need to protect people who are disabled from sex.

Dear Paul,

I'm a paraplegic. From where I sit, I have women's rears and crotches in my face all day long. You have no idea how much restraint it takes to keep my hands to myself. Last week I copped a feel but apologized and blamed it on my "bad driving" and "spastic hand."

Dude from Dubuque

Dude,

There's not an able-bodied guy on the planet who could come face-to-tail with as many front and rear ends as you do and not want to reach out and touch some. You must consider a crowded elevator to be a gift from God, as well as one of life's great torments.

Counterpoint: I received a complaint regarding my response to Dude because I didn't chastise him for his inappropriate actions. "I am really disappointed that you suggest in your response that a man couldn't be expected to withhold his sexual desire and that it's fine to occasionally use a woman's body for your own purpose."



One reason why so many of us blanch at the idea of a disabled person having sex is because the advertising industry spends billions of dollars trying to narrow our concept of what sexual attractiveness is. Never do advertisers tell us that sexual appeal might have something to do with integrity and character, given how their clients can't make any money from that. Forget even existing sexually if you are missing limbs, slur your words when you talk or are paralyzed from the chest down.

Another hurdle for many disabled people is being able to accept themselves as being sexual. If you don't accept yourself as being a sexual person, it is unlikely that others will.

Roll Models

"Prior to my becoming blind, the only person who was blind that I had seen was a beggar. I was horrified to think that this was the only option available to me as a person who was blind." From an article on women who are blind by Ellen Rubin in *Sexuality and Disability*.

One of the more discouraging aspects of having a disability is that positive role models are few and far between. If you ask people to name a famous disabled person, just as many will say the Hunchback of Notre Dame as Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Of the two, FDR was a real-life American president who provided people with a real sense of sanctuary, although he was unable to walk unaided.

Different Ways That Disabilities Happen

When people are disabled from crashes and accidents, it is often because their spinal cord was damaged. About 85% of spinal-cord injuries happen to men, many in their teens and twenties. That's because men have a penchant for doing things that involve speed or some form of combat. For instance, if a boy says he needs "pads," you might assume he's talking about something to put under his football jersey. If a girl says she needs "pads," it's likely that she's referring to sanitary napkins. In addition to sports and car crashes, disabilities might come from gun wounds, stabbings, fist fights or head injuries.

Diseases that cause disabilities can include arthritis, which can make intercourse painful or cripple your fingers so much that you can't masturbate. Diabetes can hamper an erection or a woman's ability to get wet. Multiple sclerosis can be mild and manageable or severe and debilitating. Cancer and the treatments for it can impact a person's ability and desire to have sex.

There are many genetic or congenital disorders that can cause disabilities. Medications taken during pregnancy can result in the birth of infants with severe disabilities. Parental exposure to pollutants and chemicals can cause birth defects. Disabilities can also result from strokes and heart attacks or cerebral palsy and muscular dystrophy.

Spinal-Cord Injury (SCI) Shorthand: When people with spinal-cord injuries are talking to other people with spinal-cord injuries, they sometimes use a shorthand such as "I'm a C-4 quad" or "I'm a T-3." This code refers to the location on the spine where the injury occurred. For instance, a C-4 injury occurs higher up on the spinal cord (in the neck) than a T-3, so it is likely that a person with a C-4 is paralyzed from the shoulders down (quadriplegic), whereas a T-3 has the use of his or her arms (paraplegic), and an L-4 most likely has more use than a C-4 or T-3 because the injury happened at a point on the spinal cord between the ribs and pelvis. Another factor is whether the injury was complete or incomplete, with the latter supposedly being less severe.

Quad Note: Thanks to Tom Street for this info. Tom is a C-4 quad from an auto accident. Tom manufactures a computer mouse for quadriplegics called the QuadJoy. This special mouse, combined with extra software that Tom has written, allows the user to run the entire computer, including keyboard, by mouth. The full range of clicking and dragging happens by virtue of puffing and sucking on the end of the joystick. This can be particularly helpful for a quad who would like to interact with others in chat rooms or who would like to see Internet porn in PRIVATE and without the help of an attendant. Tom can be reached on the internet at www.quadjoy.com.

Chronic vs. Acute

There are disabilities that happen all at once. They don't keep getting worse. This is true of most spinal-cord injuries. There are other disabilities, usually caused by diseases, which have symptoms that worsen over time.

For some people, it is easier to have a disability that starts off worse but stays the same. For instance, once people with spinal-cord injuries are able to learn how to deal with their disability, they can be pretty sure that their condition won't worsen and they won't have to learn a whole new set of skills just to stay even. People with chronic illnesses

have a more uncertain future and may have to constantly readapt as their illness progresses. The uncertainty of a chronic illness makes it more difficult to get on with your life, as you never know when your disease is going to pull the rug out from under you.

Even the recovery process is different for someone with an acute injury as opposed to a chronic illness. Consider a person who had his leg amputated after being run over in the parking lot at the 7-Eleven as opposed to having a leg amputated due to complications from diabetes. Outside of not getting to finish his Slurpee, the person who lost his leg at the 7-Eleven had no pre-existing condition and must face only the problems associated with the amputation. The person with progressive diabetes has to cope with numerous problems caused by the diabetes in addition to those that are specific to the amputation, not that neither situation is enviable.

Also, the treatments for disabilities or illnesses can cause sexual problems. For instance, tricyclic antidepressants are often prescribed to help with the neurogenic pain that can occur after spinal-cord injury. These drugs can decrease the desire to have sex as well as impacting the ability to have an erection and to ejaculate. The same is true for certain cancer treatments that adversely affect the sexuality of both men and women. (See the free chapter: [Sex and Breast, Brain & Ball Cancer](#).)

Double Your Trouble

As if it weren't bad enough to have your spinal cord injured, accidents that can damage a spinal cord are often severe enough to also cause traumatic head injury. Not only does the person have to cope with possible paralysis from the spinal injury, but he or she may also experience low sexual drive, poor impulse control or unpredictable behavior from the brain injury.

Can Men in Wheelchairs Get Hard-Ons?

People sometimes wonder if guys in wheelchairs can get hard-ons, but they don't wonder if women in wheelchairs can get wet. What's with that? Contrary to what you might think, a lot of males who are in wheelchairs are able to get erections. The stimulation for the erection will often need to come from direct physical contact with a guy's genitals rather than from his feeling horny, as the link between the horny center in the brain and the genitals is often damaged. Men with

disabilities can often get good erections with the help of vacuum pumps or injections. Men with higher-level spinal-cord injuries (usually quads, not paraplegics) tend to get reflex erections. These happen when the penis is being touched and have little connection to feeling horny. They usually go down as soon as the touching stops, but some couples learn how to keep the stimulation going so they can have intercourse.

Able-bodied men often become aware of their own sexual arousal by feeling their penis grow. Men who are paralyzed have to rely on other signals to know when they are aroused, e.g. nipples getting hard, goosebumps, heavier breathing and a heart that beats faster. These aren't any different from what able-bodied men experience, but how many guys notice subtle physical clues when their penises are making a bulge in their pants.

Women with spinal-cord injuries may find that the sexual wetness in their vagina is decreased or absent. Using a lubricant during intercourse can be helpful. Many women with spinal-cord injuries are able to have orgasms. Bregman and Hadley interviewed a number of women with spinal-cord injuries and found that their descriptions of orgasm were similar to those of women with no spinal-cord injury. Also, some people with spinal-cord injury have orgasms that are referred to as "para-orgasms," which are different from genital orgasms but feel really good nonetheless. Para-orgasms can be so strong that women who are injured above the T-6 level need to be aware of rapid changes in their blood pressure.

Both women and men who no longer have traditional orgasms can learn to experience a type of orgasm that is called an emotional orgasm. This kind of orgasm results in a rush of relaxation and calm in the rest of the body that's like the afterglow of an orgasm.

Whether a person who is disabled can or can't have an orgasm, the good feelings that most able-bodied people get from being touched and loved are still massively satisfying for someone who is disabled. One person with a spinal-cord injury reported, "Before my accident I couldn't get enough stimulation from the waist down; now I can't get enough from the waist up!" When a person is paralyzed, areas such as the back of the neck and arms can become extremely sensitive in a sexual way. Also, plenty of disabled people report that watching a partner doing something sexual to them can be very satisfying even if they can't feel

the actual sensations. Their brains are able to fill in the missing pieces.

Vibrator Note: Vibrators can be a helpful sexual aid for men and women with disabilities. They can supply the necessary stimulation when a hand is unable to. If you tend to be incontinent, consider getting a vibrator that's rechargeable or has batteries. That's because urine is a far better conductor of electricity than water, making plug-in models a bit risky. If your hands are too crippled to use a regular vibrator, it's possible to have a vibrator embedded in a Nerf ball.

"Will I Be Able to Have Children?"

This seems like a simple, straightforward question. But it is often an indirect way of asking, "Will I be able to have sex?" "Will anyone want to have sex with me?" "How do I have sex now that I'm like this?" The answer to all of these questions is usually yes, unless the person stays in a full-time funk and never transitions out of asking "Why me?" Try as they might, nobody but God or nature has an answer to the "Why me?" question, assuming there is an answer other than it was totally random.

Many women with disabilities are able to become pregnant. This is why most disabled women need to use birth control, even if they are paralyzed from the shoulders down. A lot of men who are paralyzed have problems ejaculating. Physicians are having some success helping these men to ejaculate by sticking electrodes up their rears and shocking the nerves in the prostate region. Some guys with spinal-cord injuries above T-12 are able to ejaculate with the help of a vibrator on their penis.

Born with It vs. Got It Along the Way

Unless they are in a band, most people who make it to adulthood have achieved a certain level of maturity. But if a person was disabled at a young age, it's possible that his or her disability has gotten in the way of achieving the maturity to behave as a responsible and caring adult. For instance, how does a kid who is disabled at age 15 progress through the usual steps toward independence if he or she needs a parent to get them out of bed and dressed each morning? If in a rehab center, how does he or she get the privacy to explore sexually as other kids do? How do they masturbate with hands that can't move?

Consider the following questions posed by a therapist who works with the disabled (*technology has made some of this dated, but you'll still be able to get the point*): "How does a young girl in a wheelchair learn how adults are sexual if her parents are afraid to be that way in front of her? How does she explore her parents' drawers when they are out and find books, movies, condoms, sponges, lingerie and so forth—as many youths do—if she cannot get into their bedroom? How can she find her brother's copies of sexually explicit publications if she cannot get under his bed where they are stashed?" [From "Performing a Sexual Evaluation on the Person With Disability or Illness" by Kenneth A. Lefebre in *Sexual Function in People with Disability and Chronic Illness*, Marca Sipski and Craig Alexander.]

People who are disabled at a young age will become adults with the same sexual drives and desires as anyone who is not disabled. However, they may not have learned appropriate ways to satisfy their sexual urges. To help fill in the missing pieces, parents and educators of disabled kids need to be more open rather than less about sexual issues.

Sex & People Who Are Developmentally Disabled

It is not likely that people who are developmentally disabled will be reading this book, although one such woman by the name of Linda who loves looking at the pictures! People with developmental disabilities have the same sexual urges and desires as everyone else. They simply go through the stages of sexual development at a slower pace.

The developmentally disabled pose special problems when it comes to sexual training, because they may need a good deal of repetitive explanation about things that many adults feel uncomfortable saying even once. Also, in their drive toward sexual pleasure, developmentally disabled kids may be even less apt to use birth control than their non-disabled partners in crime.

If you are the parent of a disabled child, or you work with people who are disabled, you might be at a loss for finding good references to help you in dealing with your child's sexual growth. *For a helpful list of resources, put 'disabled' into the search box at www.Guide2Getting.com.*



Body Image

If a person has been disabled for a long time, his body image might also include a wheelchair or braces, scars from surgeries, hands that are not particularly dexterous, a voice that slurs words, a head that doesn't sit straight on its shoulders or other features that his or her peers don't include in their idea of what body image is. It may be very difficult for someone who is disabled to feel attractive and effective if they can't see themselves as separate from the devices that help them to survive. As a result, they might need extra feedback that you value them as much as you do anyone else.



Dear Paul,

We both have spinal-cord injuries and are disabled. Yet we like watching porn that shows able-bodied people having sex. Is this weird?

Rhonda from Rolling Hills

Dear Rhonda,

None of us here have nine-inch penises, can last forty-five minutes, are always ready to have sex and who like having a penis shoved up our rear end, but we like watching pornography, too. Pornography is a fantasy. It helps people go places in their minds where many of them wouldn't go in reality even if they could. Now here's a question for you: I'll bet you aren't worried about watching able-bodied actors in TV or movies, so why when it comes to porn do you suddenly worry about being politically correct?

Explaining Yourself & Educating Others

Just like people who are able-bodied, people who are disabled need to learn their own sexual strengths and weaknesses and then teach a partner about themselves. For someone who has had a stroke, it might be important to lie on their affected side so they can use their active arm for caressing a partner. Likewise, they might have a "visual field cut" which causes them to ignore one side of their partner's body. The partner needs to let them know about this. (This example by way of social worker Sharon Bacharach.)

When it comes to enjoying sex, different disabilities pose different challenges. For instance, if you can't use your hands in a way that allows you to masturbate, then figuring out how to do that will be one of your first challenges. If you need help breathing but want to give a partner oral sex, you might need to alternate sucking on your partner's genitals with sucking breaths of air from your respirator hose. If

you can't have intercourse, then you'll need to work out ways of pleasing both yourself and your partner without it. (This book has plenty of chapters that describe ways of doing that.) Perhaps your disability has left you with little nerve sensation in your genitals, but the opening of your anus is still sensitive; stimulating it might bring you to orgasm. Maybe your neck, lips, cheeks or nipples are highly sensitized to touch. Maybe it helps if you take a warm bath or shower or to have a beer or glass of wine before having sex, which is just as true for people who are able-bodied.

Goodbye to Spontaneity

Some able-bodied couples don't like to use a condom because the thirty seconds it takes to put it on destroys the mood for them. Think of how resilient "the mood" has to be when it takes several preparations and maneuvers to be ready to have sex. Think of how resilient the mood has to be if one partner cries out in pain and adjustments need to be made in order to continue.

People who are disabled might not be able to enjoy the sexual spontaneity that able-bodied couples who don't have kids at home take for granted. Consider the following advice that was recently posted online:

"Patience is truly a virtue in disability-related sex. Disability often destroys something in sex, spontaneity for one thing. Drugs, fatigue, depression, neurological impairment can also be a destructive force. Utilizing the turn-on can partially make up for what has been taken away. Sometimes erotic books, photos or videos can enhance the performance. The type and degree of disability often demands traveling that extra mile or two." Peter Love

Getting into Relationships

"Why would any man want this body?" "No woman's going to want this!" Some individuals who have disabilities feel that nobody will find them sexually attractive. As a result, they might push away people who do. Or, at the other end of the spectrum, they might offer themselves to the first person who shows interest, even if it is not someone they like or trust. A disabled person without a solid sense of self might be starved for affection or desperately need to prove that he or she is desirable. Of course, one doesn't need to be disabled to have hang-ups,

but it can be extra-difficult when you have physical disabilities along with everything else.

Regarding the subject of dating and people with disabilities, a woman with cerebral palsy recently commented, "I think women are more accepting of differences than men. I see a lot more disabled men married or in serious relationships. I see a lot more disabled women just giving up." There are plenty of disabled men who say it's equally tough for them. Another disabled woman says one of the reasons she fell in love with her husband "was the idea that here was a person who looked and acted OK, wanting to have a relationship with me."

People with disabilities sometimes shy away from dating others who are disabled. When you are disabled yourself, there can be a kind of hatred of other people who are disabled—an inner need to say, "I'm not like them." There can also be the added problem of social acceptance. Two people in wheelchairs humming down the sidewalk garner more stares from able-bodied pedestrians than does one.

The Disabled Couple

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of being in a relationship where one or both members are disabled is that ultimately, the couple has to face the same kinds of fights, squabbles, disagreements and difficulties as couples who have no physical disability.

But when a person in an established relationship acquires a new disability, it is not uncommon for both partners to experience frustration, anger, fear, disappointment, and helplessness. Roles within the relationship may change. Neither the able-bodied member nor the one who is disabled should be afraid to seek help and advice from social workers and rehab staff.

When it comes to sexual intimacy, a couple with a new disability may need to learn anew. If your primary expression of sexuality was through intercourse, you may have a good deal of adjusting ahead. It will be easier if you are a couple whose sexuality included a full range of sensory experiences, like enjoying the beauty of a sunset, holding hands and caressing each other.

Also, if you can afford it, it would be wise to hire an attendant to perform caretaking functions. Otherwise, a parent/child dynamic can evolve between you and your partner which can intrude on feelings of sexual passion.

With a Deaf Ear & Twinkle in His Eye

A woman close to us at Goofy Foot Press works with deaf people and has also had sex with one or two deaf men. She said that she never realized how much she relies on verbal cues from a partner until she was romanced by a deaf man. Whether it's being in another room or looking down when you are having a bowl of soup, the usual conditions for connection are suddenly missing when a partner can't hear. With a deaf partner, there is no hearing without seeing. She said that the lack of verbal give-and-take is particularly noticeable during sex, whether it's oral sex or intercourse.

People who are deaf are obviously more comfortable with verbal silence during romance and lovemaking than are people who can hear. If our friend is sleeping with a man who is deaf, she lets him know that she needs more input than he might be used to giving a partner who is also deaf. She also says that it is important to have some of the lights on when you are making love to a deaf person, so they can either see you sign or read your lips. On the other hand, deaf people sometimes sign on each other's skin, or if they are in a spoons position, the person in the back can reach around a partner's body and sign in front where the partner can see.

Attacking Their Own

While many people who are disabled would welcome an increased awareness that they are just as sexual as anyone else, some don't. A few years ago, when a mainstream glossy magazine for disabled people ran a story on sex and the disabled, some disabled readers were so upset that they canceled their subscriptions. Worse yet, the article was so tame that it could have been published in *Parade* magazine or *House & Garden*. Perhaps the subject of sex brings up huge amounts of frustration and sadness for some who are disabled, to the point where they get angry at sex itself.

So You Won't Have to Read the "Sex during Pregnancy" Chapter Unless You Want To

Women can get pregnant in a wheelchair just as easily as they can get pregnant in any other chair. Don't think that because you are disabled or paralyzed from the shoulders or waist down you somehow can't get pregnant. Be sure to speak to each other and to your physician about birth control.

Note: Until recently, it was believed that birth-control pills, shots and implants might be unsafe for some women who are in wheelchairs. It's not the wheelchair that's the problem, but proneness to circulatory problems and blood clots that can be increased by the birth-control pill. If your gynecologist isn't used to working with women who have disabilities, check with the *National Spinal Cord Foundation* for a referral.

Attendants and Caregivers –The Good and Bad of It

Powerful feelings can develop between people who are patients and those who are hired to care for them—both loving and hateful. It is beyond the scope of this book to explore the different possibilities, except to say that it does little good to turn a blind eye to the dynamics that can arise between caretaker and caregiver.

If you are able-bodied, consider for a moment the issue of privacy. The kind of privacy that able-bodied people take for granted might not exist for someone who is disabled. This can range from bathing and completing bowel movements to preparing for masturbation and sex. It may be necessary for a disabled person to share private aspects of themselves with an attendant that some able-bodied people don't feel comfortable sharing even with a partner of many years.

Considering the level of dependency that disabled people can have, opportunities for abuse by attendants are rife and are unfortunately quite common. It is important that disabled people speak up against assistants who are abusive. If this is a concern for you, please contact your local center for independent living.

Helping the Helpers

To have fulfilling sex lives, people with disabilities need the help of several different medical subspecialties. These might include neurology, psychology, urology, oncology, endocrinology, physical and rehabilitative medicine and sex therapy. Unfortunately, getting medical specialists to work together in a collaborative effort requires that professional egos be set aside. The problem multiplies when the issue is sex, since many of the professionals who need to work together might be uncomfortable with the subject of sex.

Rehab Note: When rehab therapists get around to mentioning sex, it is usually in combination with discussions about bowel and bladder

functioning. This is most unfortunate. People who are newly disabled need access to positive information about sexuality early in their rehabilitation. Even if they reject the information, it is something positive that will remain in their consciousness, to be accessed at another time.

Stroke Studies – Interesting for a Number of Reasons

Stroke survivors, as a group, experience a drop in sexual activity. Until recently, this was thought to have physical, rather than emotional, causes. However, a study of stroke survivors by Buzzellie, di Francesco, Giaquinto and Nolte concluded that “psychological issues, rather than medical ones, account for disruption of sexual functioning in stroke survivors.”

It is especially significant that the researchers found no differences in the sexual functioning of people with right-brained lesions as opposed to left-brain lesions or contralateral lesions. This contradicts our modern tendency to view behaviors as coming from one side of the brain or the other. This study indicates that sexuality is neither “right-brained” nor “left-brained.”

Recommended Resources

Sexuality Reborn is an excellent video in which four likeable and articulate couples tell about their personal experience with sex and disability. At least one person in each couple is wheelchair-assisted. It is very helpful for both disabled and able-bodied viewers. College instructors who use the *Guide to Getting It On!* in their classes are highly encouraged to show this to their students. A great deal of humanness is conveyed without a moment of pity or self-absorption. There is something about the honesty and genuineness of the couples who speak in this video that gives able-bodied people a more realistic and grounded perception of people who are disabled. There are parts of the video where the couples are naked and having sex, but it isn't in a way that's going to ruffle the feathers of your dean or regents. The only criticism that reviewers had was that the occasional comments by the talking-head medical specialists seemed unnecessary and detracted from, rather than added, to the video's effectiveness.

Untold Desires shows interviews about sex with people who have all kinds of disabilities. This award-winning documentary contains no

nudity and makes an excellent companion tape for *Sexually Reborn*. Anyone going through a rehab program should get to see both videos. Included is a wonderful interview with a woman who has severe cerebral palsy. She is astute, funny, and energetic. The video provides subtitles when she speaks because her speech is so CP-involved. The interviews with other disabled people are equally valuable. As an additional bonus, there is spectacular footage of one chair-assisted man skiing down a steep mountain and a disabled dude racing down stairs and streets. Redefines the term “No Fear.” Highly recommended for people with disabilities as well as those without.

Murderball is not about sex, but the next best thing: quads who play rugby. This is full-contact rugby in wheelchairs that would make Mad Max proud. They end up competing in the Paralympic Games. If people with disabilities can do this, they can make sex work.

RECOMMENDED: *The Ultimate Guide to Sex and Disability*, by Miriam Kaufman, Cory Silverberg and Fran Odette, Cleis Press. This is full of helpful suggestions and ideas, and should be on the shelf of any individual or couple who is experiencing disabilities or chronic pain.

Citations—Both quotes in the section “Getting into Relationships” are from “Dating Issues for Women with Physical Disabilities,” *Sexuality and Disability*, by Rintals, Howland, Nosek, et al.

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