

## Sex, intimacy, and fertility treatment

When we think about Fertility and making babies, one of the first things that comes to many people's minds is Sex. However, for those who are on a fertility pathway and going through ART, it's not uncommon to experience changes or challenges to your sex life!

Let's unpack this a little... If you are in a relationship and just starting to try to conceive, Sex might feel fun and exciting, and you and your partner may feel more connected than ever in your plans to have a baby. But, like many, if you have hit setbacks along the way or it's taking longer than you had hoped to become pregnant, it's easy for sex to start to feel a little bit like a regimented chore, perfectly timed around ovulation with the explicit goal of pregnancy rather than the fun playfulness—purely for enjoyment that it might have been previously.

Some people will recognise a sense of anxiety or pressure to “perform” on cue and feel that the stakes are higher with baby-making-sex, which can take your attention away from the enjoyment and pleasure in the moment.

If you are undergoing fertility treatment, whether you are in a heterosexual relationship, a same sex relationship or a single person, the process of fertility treatment can be a source of stress, which in turn can impact on our sexual wellbeing or sexual identity.

Psychologist and sex educator, Emily Nagoski describes a Dual control process to sexual response where she provides a metaphor of the sexual response system as like a car with an accelerator (that helps us feel like having sex) and brakes (that notice all of the reasons not to have sex!). If we think about this in the context of going through fertility treatment, we might consider that there are many potential aspects of the process along the way that cause us to push our foot down hard on our 'sexual brake pads'. This might be a result of feeling high stress levels, anxiety about treatment outcomes, pain, or managing the various medications or hormonal treatments. Some people may be coming to terms with being told that sexual intercourse is unlikely to result in pregnancy for either male or female factors. Understandably this can bring a sense of grief and challenge the way we think about our sexual identity.

Further to this, if you are undergoing treatment, which may include taking daily injections or having regular scans and clinical appointments, you may simply feel that sex just isn't appealing at the moment, and that's okay!

Here are some things that you might consider when it comes to Sex and Intimacy through fertility treatment.

For Heterosexual couples – Try and separate baby making-sex from sex purely for pleasure: You may want to designate different rooms in your house for each type. Think about the ways you enjoyed sex early in your relationship and find ways to recreate it. Perhaps plan encounters at non-fertile times, where you know the goal is not to get pregnant and can make more mental space for simply enjoying the moment.





Consider options for intimacy and connection outside of sexual intercourse. It may be that you're not interested in sex at the moment and that's okay... remember that our sexual response shifts up and down for many reasons. There are lots of ways to experience intimacy whether you are alone or with someone else. Use your imagination to plan recreational sex.

For those in a relationship or with a sexual partner, communication is key here. Try not to expect that they know how you are feeling, what you're thinking, or what you want. Being honest about what you are experiencing, including what you like, don't like or need helps you connect and work better together.

Consider what your "accelerators and Breaks" might be... Coming back to Emily's car metaphor, take some time to think about what your personal sexual accelerators and brakes are. When we know more about what drives us or alternatively acts as a barrier to our personal sexual responses, we gain a little more control and have a better idea of how to talk to others about it too. For instance, "I'm not feeling very sexual right now, the medication is making me feel uncomfortable", "I really like it when you..."

Take time off for playtime. Infertility can feel like a full-time job so it is important to "take time off" by consciously making time for yourself, or each other if you're in a relationship. Have fertility free time. Make time for dates where you can have fun and take a break from infertility. Having things to look forward to that are not dictated by your fertility window or treatment schedule can be positive. Look for ways to put energy into yourself or your relationship.



Lean on your supports outside of your one and only: Its easy to start relying on just ourselves or just our partners to meet our emotional, physical, social and sexual needs. When going through fertility treatment, this can feel like a lot. When we reach out to others outside of our relationship for support, it can sometimes take the pressure of your relationship, leaving more room for connection. Equally, for our singles out there, making sure you access support helps with general wellbeing and feeling like you have more capacity to focus on you.

Seek Help: Again, it's common for people to experience challenges or up's and downs to their sex lives through treatment for all the reasons we have spoken about and more. Don't be afraid to seek help around this, you are not on your own. Consider reaching out for counselling and accessing further resources.