Huntington’s disease

Sexual problems
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It is by no means certain that couples affected by Huntington’s disease will have any sexual problems at all. Many couples continue to have a mutually satisfying relationship for a long time and adapt to circumstances in a way suited to both. However, it is not uncommon for people to experience difficulties in their relationship.

It is a subject many people find difficult to discuss with their families or friends, and embarrassing to mention to their doctors or other health and social care professionals.

Every individual situation is different, and we are not going to try to give easy answers; but rather explore some of the problems we know people are facing and see what or who could help.

**Physical problems**

Some people may find they have difficulty in obtaining or retaining an erection. There may be a medical cause for this which should be discussed with your doctor. If the problem has only occurred since drugs have been prescribed – or changed – then this could well be the cause. Again, check with your doctor.
Difficulties because of choreic movements

Some people have problems maintaining intercourse because of the involuntary movements. It may be helpful to use a different position so that the affected partner is stable and well supported. Couples will probably need to experiment to find out what is the most successful position for them.

Psychological and emotional problems

One of the features of Huntington’s is the lessening of normal inhibitions. This can also be true of sexual behaviour and some people with Huntington’s may become sexually over-active. It may mean that people might solicit a number of others, but much more commonly, they make extra demands on their partners. These demands may be quite inappropriate as to the time and place, and can be very exhausting for the partner either in meeting them or standing the consequences of refusal.

The person with Huntington’s may be feeling quite seriously depressed, frightened, isolated and unloved.

One of the ways he or she may try to fight these feelings is by gaining reassurance through physical closeness and therefore sex. The overpowering need may cause excessive demands which the partner simply cannot meet. Refusal may be seen as rejection.
As the needs of the person with Huntington’s increases, there may well be a diminished interest by the partner. Someone with choreic movements and behaviour problems may become unattractive in the eyes of the spouse and sexual contact an ordeal rather than a pleasure.

Many partners feel very guilty about this, blaming themselves for what are quite natural reactions.

There are no easy answers to any of these problems. In cases of acute sexual over-activity there are drugs available. However, they can have side-effects and should only be used when really necessary.

If it is at all possible the couple should try to discuss their problems between themselves, or with the help of a counsellor, so that they can understand each other’s feelings. Extra attention and affection may reduce the need for actual intercourse, although some people have found that this has the opposite effect, and any physical contact is misinterpreted. As said before, a person with Huntington’s disease may need a great deal of reassurance and may easily feel rejected. A caring and affectionate attitude should help, together with an acknowledgement of some of the feelings they may have.

Because of the confused feelings on both sides, some partners have felt that the only way they can manage is by ending the sexual relationship. This may mean
separate beds or even separate rooms and may be a distressing decision to take because it is indicative that the previous marital relationship has come to an end. If the physical side of the relationship is intolerable to them, then this may be a way they can continue to give affection and practical care.

This information sheet is an initial effort to reassure people that difficulties are due to the illness and to give more information about the problems people may face and the ways others have dealt with them. Although the subject can be a difficult and embarrassing one to raise, it is important you speak to a health care professional if you are faced with these difficulties.
Fact sheets available from the Huntington’s Disease Association:

- General information about Huntington’s disease and the Huntington’s disease Association
- Predictive testing for Huntington’s disease
- Talking to children about Huntington’s disease
- Information for teenagers
- A young adult's guide
- Eating and swallowing difficulties
- Huntington’s disease and diet
- The importance of dental care
- Communication skills
- Behavioural problems
- Sexual problems
- Huntington’s disease and the law
- Huntington’s disease and driving
- Advice on life assurance, pensions, mortgages etc.
- Seating equipment and adaptations
- Checklist for choosing a care home
- Advance Decision to Refuse Treatment (ADRT)
- A carer's guide
- Challenging behaviour in Juvenile Huntington’s disease
- A brief guide to Juvenile Huntington’s disease for children’s hospices and palliative care services
- A teacher’s guide
- A young person with Juvenile Huntington’s disease at school

All fact sheets can be downloaded free of charge from our website www.hda.org.uk or ordered by phone 0151 331 5444 or email info@hda.org.uk

For a publication price list/order form, membership form, details of our Specialist Huntington’s disease Advisers and local Branches and Support Groups, please phone 0151 331 5444 or email info@hda.org.uk