

Sexuality/Sexual Dysfunction in Acquired Brain Injury

Condition: Sexual dysfunction in acquired brain injury refers to the inability of patients to engage in satisfactory sexual activity, due to problems with desire, arousal, orgasm, or pain.

Background: People with acquired brain disorders often experience sexual disorders due to problems with the nervous system, nerve functioning, behavior, or mental ability. Hormone problems or medications used to treat other symptoms may also negatively affect sexual performance in these patients.

Risk Factors: Following traumatic brain injury, 30% of men experience erectile dysfunction, and 40% experience orgasm problems. Following stroke, more than half of patients experience sexual dysfunction. Other risk factors include certain medications, psychological issues, dependence on others for daily tasks, and the presence of other diseases, including diabetes.

History and Symptoms: A patient's general medical history, including medications, will offer insight to the problem. Specific questions about desire, sexual orientation, experiences, abuse, pain, sexual response, orgasm, menstrual cycle (women), libido, or change in need for shaving facial hair (men) can provide important information.

Physical Exam: A physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R) physician will perform a physical exam to assess communication ability, range of motion, muscle strength and control, sensation, pelvic floor, genitals, and rectum in order to assess potential causes of the problem.

Diagnostic Process: A PM&R physician may order Blood and urine tests to assess hormone levels, liver or kidney function, blood sugar levels, or immune status. Other tests may be used to assess sexual arousal and response. MRI or electrodiagnosis may be used to test sexual response or nerve function.

Rehab Management: Erectile dysfunction can be treated with medications or medical devices, such as constrictor bands, vacuum pump, or penis implants. If the problem lies in the desire for sexual activity, treatment with antidepressants, botanical massage oil, hormone supplementation, or natural dietary supplements (yohimbine) can be helpful. Sexual behavior disorders can be treated with behavioral therapy, medications (antidepressants or anticonvulsants), or hormonal therapies. Sex therapy with both partners as well as physical exercises may be used to improve sexual satisfaction. To treat sensorimotor disorders, changes in positioning and use of sex toys may be advised.

Other Resources for Patients and Families: Resources, including counseling, for patients and partners are available.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is PM&R?

Physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R), also known as physiatry, is a primary medical specialty that aims to enhance and restore functional ability and improve quality of life to those with injuries, physical impairments or disabilities affecting the brain, spinal cord, nerves, bones, joints, ligaments, muscles and tendons. PM&R physicians, known as physiatrists, evaluate and treat the whole body, maximize patients' independence in their daily life and are experts in designing comprehensive, patient-centered treatment plans to empower patients to achieve their goals. By taking the whole body into account, they can accurately pin-point problems, decrease pain, assist in recovery from devastating injuries and maximize overall outcomes and performance with non-surgical and peri-surgical options. To learn more, visit www.aapmr.org/aboutpmr.

What makes PM&R physicians unique?

PM&R physicians' training focuses not just on treating medical conditions, but on enhancing the patient's performance and quality of life in the context of those medical conditions. They focus not only on one part of the body, but instead on the development of a comprehensive program for putting the pieces of a person's life back together – medically, socially, emotionally and vocationally – after injury or disease. PM&R physicians make and manage medical diagnoses, design a treatment plan and prescribe the therapies that physical therapists or other allied therapists perform or that are carried out by the patients themselves. By providing an appropriate treatment plan, PM&R physicians help patients stay as active as possible at any age. Their broad medical expertise allows them to treat disabling conditions throughout a person's lifetime.

Why see a PM&R physician?

A PM&R physician will thoroughly assess your condition, needs, and expectations and rule out any serious medical illnesses to develop a treatment plan. By understanding your condition and goals, you and your PM&R physician can develop a treatment plan suited to your unique needs.

How do I find a PM&R physician near me?

Visit www.aapmr.org/findapmrphysician or contact your primary care physician for a referral.