

## **Sexual Intimacy and Endometriosis: Understanding the Challenges**

Romantic relationships can be affected differently by endometriosis compared to other relationships. Individuals with endometriosis often experience discomfort and pain during sex, making it an uncomfortable experience. Explaining this condition to partners can be challenging, especially when there is limited personal understanding. Many movies and media portray the first sexual experience as painful, but for those with endometriosis, pain can occur every time, leading to feelings of brokenness and isolation. Jess, the founder of Endo Warriors Aotearoa, shares her personal experience.

## **Effects on Romantic Relationships**

Intimacy with a partner can be anxiety-inducing for individuals with endometriosis due to the potential pain it may cause. Being intimate can trigger flare-ups, bleeding, and pain during and after using the toilet. Although intimacy is not everything in a relationship, it can be a significant aspect. Stress is another factor that can make intimacy challenging for romantic partners, as it may induce flare-ups. While pain during sex is a common symptom of endometriosis, not all individuals with the condition experience it. Pain during sex can result from penetration and other movements related to intercourse, especially when endometrial tissue has grown behind the vagina or lower uterus. Vaginal dryness can also contribute to this pain. Experiencing pain during sex not only affects libido but can also create difficulties in expressing sexuality as an individual and as a couple.

## **Understanding Dyspareunia and its Symptoms**

The World Endometriosis Foundation reports that 42% of individuals with dyspareunia have completely avoided intercourse due to pain or the fear and anxiety associated with it. If you experience painful intercourse, you may notice the following symptoms:

- Pain only at sexual entry (penetration)
- Pain with every penetration, including inserting a tampon
- Deep pain during thrusting
- Burning or aching pain
- Throbbing pain that lasts for hours after intercourse

Dyspareunia, the medical term for painful intercourse, refers to persistent or recurrent genital pain that occurs just before, during, or after sex. The causes of painful intercourse vary depending on whether the pain occurs during entry or deep thrusting. Emotional factors can also be associated with different types of painful intercourse.

## **Entry Pain Causes:**

- Inadequate lubrication, often due to insufficient foreplay
- Decreased estrogen levels after menopause, childbirth, or during breastfeeding
- Certain medications are known to affect sexual desire or arousal, leading to decreased lubrication and painful sex (e.g., antidepressants, high blood pressure medications, sedatives, antihistamines, and certain birth control pills)
- Injury, trauma, or irritation caused by accidents, pelvic surgery, female circumcision, or episiotomy (a cut made during childbirth to enlarge the birth canal)
- Inflammation, infection, or skin disorders in the genital area, such as urinary tract infections or eczema

### Deep Pain Causes:

- Certain illnesses and conditions like endometriosis, pelvic inflammatory disease, uterine prolapse, retroverted uterus, uterine fibroids, cystitis, irritable bowel syndrome, pelvic floor dysfunction, adenomyosis, hemorrhoids, and ovarian cysts
- Scarring from pelvic surgery, including hysterectomy, leading to painful intercourse
- Surgeries or medical treatments like radiation and chemotherapy for cancer, causing changes that make sex painful
- Emotional factors, where initial pain can lead to fear of recurring pain, making relaxation difficult, and resulting in further pain. Avoidance of sex may occur due to pain association.

### Communication with Your Partner about Endometriosis

Talking about endometriosis can be challenging for those who suffer from it, especially with their partners. Effective communication is essential in all relationships, particularly romantic ones. It is important for our loved ones to understand our condition and for us to feel comfortable reaching out on difficult days. This may include asking for assistance with heat packs, grocery shopping, or simply venting. Dealing with any chronic illness can be overwhelming and lonely. Sometimes, we may feel the need to rely on our partners more than they rely on us, which can lead to feelings of guilt. Remember, you have endometriosis; you are not defined by it. Witnessing a loved one in pain is not easy, and frustration may arise when they cannot alleviate the pain. Inviting your partner to appointments can help them engage with healthcare professionals and address any questions they may have. If discussing endometriosis face-to-face feels challenging, sending a message to explain your feelings is also acceptable. Painful sex can significantly impact the individual with endometriosis and their overall well-being. Penetration can be painful, creating challenges for the sufferer.

### Enhancing Intimacy with Endometriosis

Despite the challenges posed by painful sex in endometriosis, there are ways to maintain a healthy and active sex life without penetration. Exploring alternative options can bring enjoyment and satisfaction. Jess, the founder of Endo Warriors Aotearoa, suggests various approaches:

- Get to know your body: Discover what feels good to you and where it feels good. Take it slow and explore self-pleasure, using your hands to run all over your body. Masturbation, specifically resulting in orgasm, can release endorphins that possess pain-killing properties.
- Experiment with different positions: Some positions put less pressure on areas of the pelvis containing endometrial tissue. Shallow penetration positions, such as spooning or modified doggy style, or being on top to control the depth and speed of penetration, can be beneficial. Adult toy stores, such as Adult Toy Mega Store, offer great options and information on sex and endometriosis.
- Non-penetrative options: Vibrators and toys designed for external stimulation can be used instead of penetration. Clitoral vibrators are recommended if penetration is challenging.
- Introduce the "Bumper" product: The Bumper is a sex toy that provides a cushioned buffer during penetration. It consists of two parts, the Bumper Thrust Buffer and the Donut Buffer, which can be used together or independently to create a protective cushion. Made of ultra-soft SilaSkin material, the Bumper ensures comfort during intimate moments.
- Use lubricant: Lubrication is crucial if natural lubrication is insufficient. Lubricants can be used with toys or your partner to reduce discomfort.

## **Tips for a More Enjoyable Sex Life with Endometriosis**

To make your sex life more enjoyable while managing endometriosis-related pain, consider the following tips:

- **Be aware of medication effects:** Hormonal medication can cause vaginal dryness, contributing to pain during penetration. Medications may also affect your sex drive, leading to reduced desire or a longer time to get in the mood.
- **Use lubricant:** Lubricant can alleviate vaginal dryness and ease pain. Apply and reapply as needed during intimacy.
- **Try different positions:** Experiment with various positions to find what works best for you and your partner. Changing positions can reduce anxiety and add excitement to intimacy.
- **Open communication:** Inform your partner if any actions or positions cause pain. Switch positions to allow you to control the speed and rhythm. Engaging in foreplay can help increase arousal and connection with your partner.
- **Consult a doctor or specialist:** Discuss your pain during sex with a healthcare professional and ask for a referral to see a pelvic physiotherapist if you can not afford to see a pelvic physiotherapist privately

Remember, you **HAVE** endometriosis, you are **NOT** endometriosis. We want you to know there is hope and just because painful sex is common with endo, it in no way means you have to accept it or let it be your “normal”. If you are experiencing frequent pain during sex, speak to your doctor or gynaecologist about possible treatments