

# Sexual wellbeing guide

for people with stomas  
and their partners

A guide to support sexual wellbeing for individuals with stomas and their partners.

**CliniMed® SecuriCare®**

# Introduction

## Meet the authors...

### Kevin Hayles



Kevin Hayles is a Stoma Care Nurse with over 20 years of clinical experience including in India, Iran, and across Europe. He currently leads a team of SecuriCare Nurses

as a Clinical Services Manager, helping to provide excellent stoma care throughout England.

Kevin specialises in many aspects of stoma care including:

- **Parastomal hernia**
- **Gastrointestinal anatomy & physiology**
- **High-output stoma**
- **Sexual health for people living with a stoma**

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Pamela White is an experienced clinician currently responsible for Clinical Governance and Regulatory Affairs at CliniMed and SecuriCare.

She has many years' experience in the hospital and healthcare industry, with skills in:

- **Nursing education**
- **Clinical governance**
- **Medical device regulation**
- **Stoma care**
- **Urology and continence**
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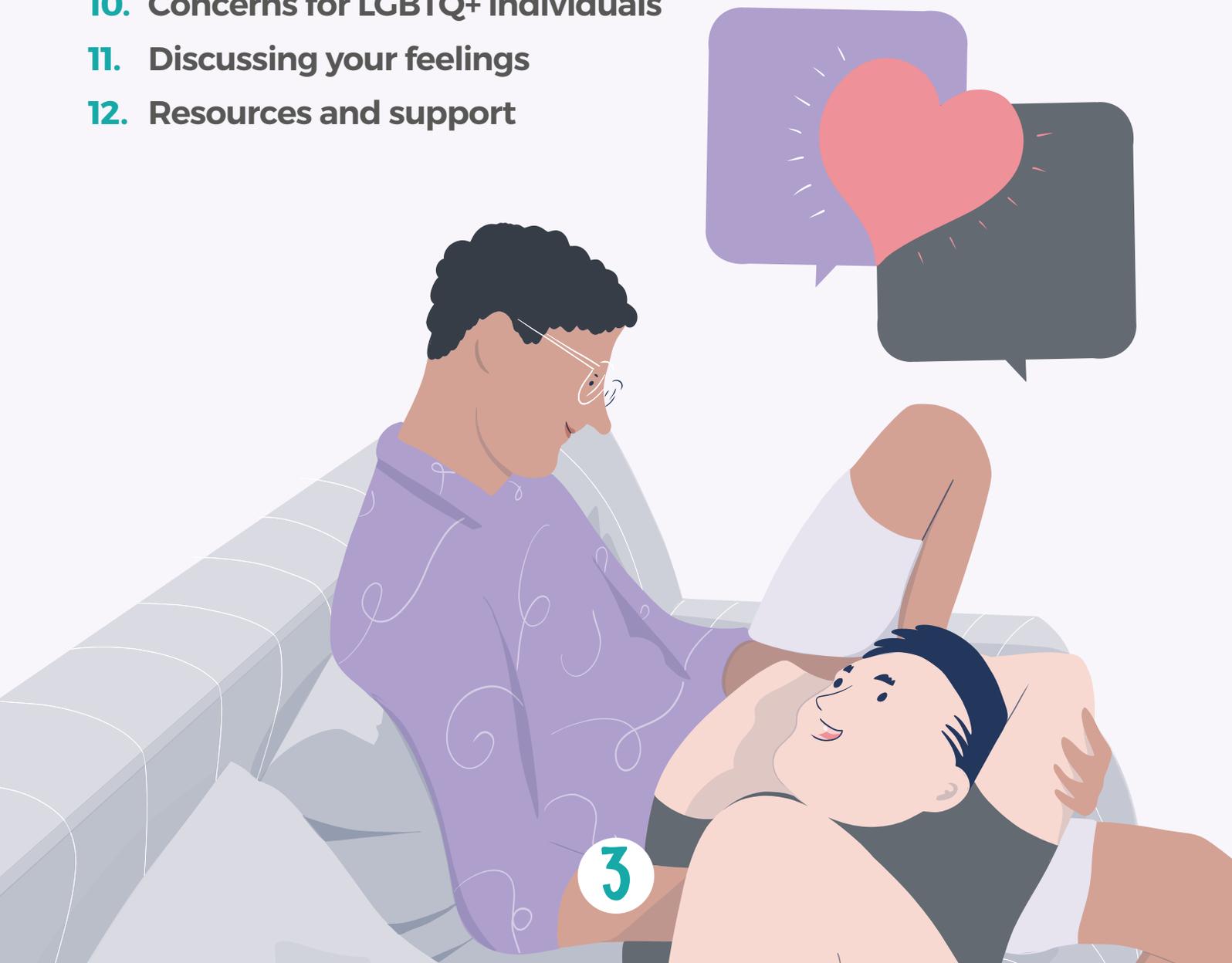
#### **Disclaimer:**

Always check with your Stoma Care Nurse or healthcare professional.

The information we have provided is intended as guidance only and should always be used alongside advice from a qualified medical professional.

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# Life changes and relationships

**It can be difficult to deal with the changes to your body that come with a stoma. Especially since stoma functions are often taken for granted and poorly discussed.**

Using stoma pouches and accessories may further complicate matters. Some people can feel embarrassed relying on these products, or struggle with the social challenges surrounding having a stoma. Relying on a stoma may feel like a loss of control over your bodily functions.

Fortunately, having a stoma is becoming more widely discussed in the media, including social media. This discussion is helping to raise awareness and foster supportive connections.

## Social impact

Worries around lack of bodily control, leaking, and social judgement can prompt people to avoid social events. Some people worry that family and friends won't understand the changes that are happening, which can lead to withdrawal and social isolation.<sup>1</sup>

It can be helpful to talk to other people who are going through a similar journey. Engaging with support groups and finding communities of people with similar experiences can help alleviate these feelings of isolation.



**More information can be found in the resources section, but some useful groups include:**

- The Ileostomy and Internal Pouch Association
- Colostomy UK
- The Urostomy Association



# Life changes and sexual wellbeing

**When your body goes through significant changes, such as the creation of a stoma, it may well affect your self-image and confidence.**

Misconceptions and negative associations with stomas may prompt individuals to distance themselves from even their closest family and friends.

Some people feel they need to conceal

their pouch from view, which can be especially difficult when being physically intimate with another person.

Together, these factors may impact intimacy and sexual relationships (whether that's with a new or long-term partner).

Remember, intimacy encompasses more than just sex.<sup>2</sup> Intimacy includes:

**Emotional  
Closeness**

**Trust**

**Communication**

A lack of intimacy can be upsetting for both the individual with the stoma and their partner. But with time, patience, and the right support, you can work to improve your intimacy and sex life.



# Supporting intimacy

## Communication is an important aspect of intimacy – sexual or otherwise.

**Open discussions with your partner about your needs and concerns can strengthen your relationship and improve your overall wellbeing.**

**The following key areas can also help support intimacy with your partner.**

### Physical touch

Intimacy can encompass more than sex. Cherish kisses, cuddles, and holding hands.

### Non-physical intimacy

Intimacy may also mean deep conversations or sharing quality time. Make sure to express your feelings for each other in a variety of ways and adapt to your new situation as needed.

### Keeping it fun

Remember to have fun and prioritise each other's pleasure.

Try to avoid focusing solely on penetration, as this can detract from the enjoyment of intimacy. Stress and pressure can also easily dampen the mood, so aim to enjoy the experience with no preconceptions.

### Products to enhance your comfort and confidence

A variety of products can help maintain your enjoyment during intimacy. Some people find bed or chair protection to be helpful. Stoma covers and stoma-disguising clothing allows some individuals to feel more relaxed and confident. It's important to find what works best for you and your unique situation.

### Sexual intimacy as a carer or supportive partner

Becoming a carer or providing support for your partner can introduce new challenges and shift the dynamics of your relationship.

This change may stir a range of emotions, such as loss or grief, which can affect sexual wellbeing. It's normal

to have complex feelings about intimacy during this time, and discussing these thoughts openly is important. Don't hesitate to advocate for yourself and share your concerns with someone you trust – there's nothing embarrassing about it.

# Sex and contraception

**People with stomas can have sex just like those without. Conventional positions are almost always possible for those who want to have sexual intercourse.**

Remember that cuddling, kissing, and touching are important parts of sexuality. You will need to take it gently. Focusing on tenderness and affection can be a good way to begin, with no expectation of penetration – just see how it goes.

## Will my stoma pouch interfere with sex?

Some people may worry about their stoma pouch interfering during sex.

To avoid any discomfort or distractions, you can empty or renew the pouch beforehand, fold it up, and secure it to your body with tape. This keeps it out of the way, allowing you to focus on your partner.

Additionally, using a fabric cover or wearing a soft, snug-fitting top can help conceal the pouch and prevent it from rubbing against your skin or your partner's.

## Will a stoma affect the contraception that me and my partner can use?

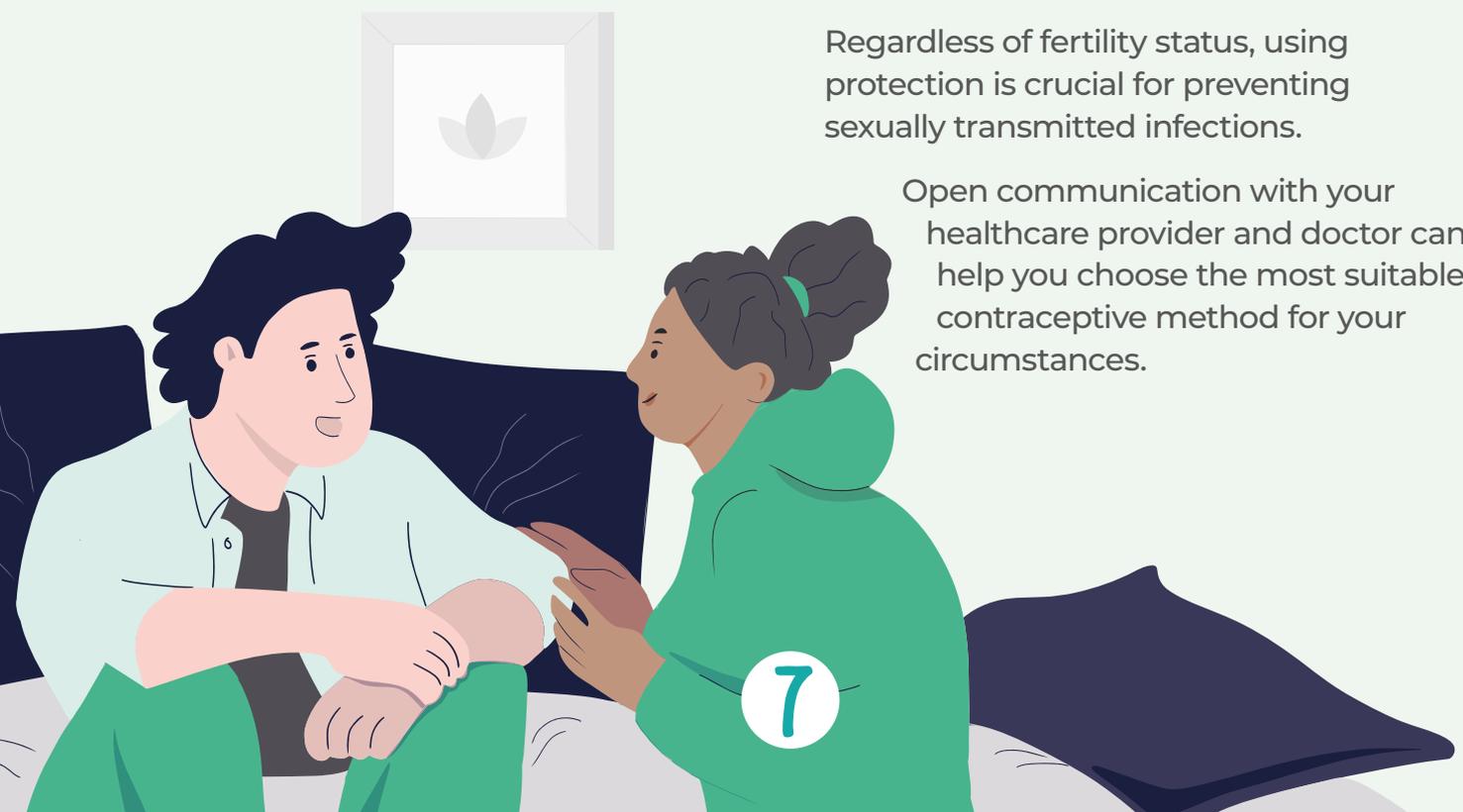
If you're sexually active and not planning on having children, using contraception is advisable.

Common methods like condoms, implants, the contraceptive pill, or Intra Uterine Devices (IUDs) are generally effective. However, people with an ileostomy should consult their doctor about the best option, as the absorption of the contraceptive pill might be affected.<sup>3</sup>

For men, a vasectomy is a reliable, permanent option if future family planning is not desired.

Regardless of fertility status, using protection is crucial for preventing sexually transmitted infections.

Open communication with your healthcare provider and doctor can help you choose the most suitable contraceptive method for your circumstances.



# Concerns for women

**Women with stomas can lead satisfying sex lives and have children. However, abdominal surgery can lead to specific issues, such as perineal tenderness (tenderness in the area between the anus and vagina) or vaginal dryness. Other treatments like chemotherapy or radiation can also impact sexual desire and satisfaction.**

## Pain during sex

Lubricants and exploring different sexual positions can help ease discomfort during sexual intercourse. If using condoms as a form of contraception, make sure to use water-based lubricants only.

If you experience pain during penetration, experimenting with positions that reduce pressure on the abdomen, such as side-lying or from-behind positions, might help.

Consulting a physiotherapist for pelvic floor exercises can also improve sexual comfort and overall pelvic health.

## Pregnancy and childbirth

As a woman with a stoma, you can still have a healthy pregnancy and vaginal delivery is often possible (depending on individual circumstances).

By working closely with your healthcare team, you can plan and manage your pregnancy for the best possible outcome.

## Planning your pregnancy

Before you start trying for a baby, try to schedule a consultation with your stoma care nurse, gastroenterologist, and obstetrician (if you have them). They can give you personalised advice on how your stoma might impact your pregnancy and help you prepare for any potential

challenges. Together, you'll review your medications to make sure they're safe for pregnancy and get tailored nutritional guidance to manage any dietary needs.

If you have concerns about your fertility, don't hesitate to bring them up so you can explore any necessary options or treatments with your healthcare provider.

## Managing your stoma during pregnancy

As your body changes throughout your pregnancy, you'll need to keep an eye on your stoma and adjust as needed. Your stoma care nurse can help make sure your bag fits securely and comfortably as your body changes.

Be sure to use gentle, stoma-friendly skincare products and keep up with regular appliance changes to avoid any skin issues. Staying hydrated and maintaining a balanced diet will help you feel your best, while avoiding foods that could cause blockages or gas will keep you more comfortable.

Exercises like walking, swimming, and prenatal yoga are great ways to stay active. Wearing loose, comfortable clothing (including maternity wear with supportive bands) can make a big difference in how you feel as your pregnancy progresses.

# Concerns for men

**After your surgery, there's likely to be a period of adjustment as you get used to your stoma. You may feel nervous about damaging your stoma or displacing the bag during sex.**

Some men also find that the change affects their self-esteem which can reduce their libido. With time, these issues should get better as you become accustomed to your stoma and how to deal with it.

## Erectile dysfunction

Erectile dysfunction (ED) can happen following stoma surgery, though it's often temporary.

Healing from surgery takes time, and, much like women too, other treatments like chemotherapy or radiation can also impact sexual desire and performance.

ED is a common problem and doesn't just happen to men with stomas. It can arise due to various factors, including:

- **Fatigue**
- **Stress**
- **Lifestyle choices**
- **An underlying medical condition**

If you're facing challenges, discussing them with a healthcare professional can help you find a solution that works for you.



# Concerns for LGBTQ+ individuals

**As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, you may have unique concerns about living with a stoma.**

It's essential to feel empowered to communicate openly with your healthcare provider about your sexual orientation and any specific needs you may have. Your experiences and feelings are valid, and there are ways to ensure your care aligns with your identity.

## Intimacy and self-esteem

For LGBTQ+ individuals, adjusting to life with a stoma might involve addressing body image and self-esteem. It's important to explore what makes you feel comfortable and confident in intimate situations.

Whether your concerns are about your stoma or other aspects of your identity, open communication with your partner and healthcare team is key to a satisfying and affirming sex life.

## Gender-affirming care

If you're a transgender individual managing a stoma alongside your gender-affirming treatments and surgeries, it's possible you'll have unique challenges.

Having open and thorough discussions with your doctor will ensure that your stoma care fits seamlessly with your gender-affirming journey. Whether it's your hormone therapy, upcoming surgeries, or other specific needs, your care plan should reflect your individual circumstances.



# Discussing your feelings

Living with a stoma can affect more than just your sex life. Whether you're caring for your partner or experiencing stoma issues yourself, communicating openly and honestly is the best way to support your wellbeing and your relationships.

## Discussing your concerns with your partner

### 1. Find the right time

Choose a time where you can talk comfortably, openly and without distractions.

### 2. Explain how you are feeling

By honestly explaining your thoughts and desires your partner can learn and understand more about your perspective.

### 3. Use clear language

Although it may seem easier to use euphemisms or drop hints, this can lead to confusion and a lack of understanding. Try to be direct and unambiguous.

### 4. Listen actively

Once you have expressed your perspective, allow your partner to share their thoughts and try to remain open.

### 5. Remain positive

Remember that the purpose of this conversation is to help you understand each other and improve your relationship by finding solutions together.

## Talking to a healthcare professional

Appointments can be overwhelming. Try to think about what you want to discuss beforehand and note down any questions you have about your sexual health. Be direct and use clear language – this will make sure there's no confusion about what you're discussing.

Your healthcare professional may need to ask further questions to understand how best to help you, so be prepared to discuss your concerns and answer questions about your sexual health.

If there's something you don't understand, don't be afraid to seek clarification so you can fully engage with the health professional's advice.



# Resources and support

## General Stoma Resources

Colostomy UK: Provides support, advice, and information to people with a stoma: [colostomyuk.org](https://colostomyuk.org)

Ileostomy and Internal Pouch Association, known as IA, is a registered charity supporting people living with an ileostomy or internal pouch, their families, friends and carers: [iasupport.org](https://iasupport.org)

Urostomy Association: Support and information for people with, or considering, a urinary diversion. Learn more at: [urostomyassociation.org.uk](https://urostomyassociation.org.uk)

## LGBTQ+ Specific Resources

LGBT Health and Wellbeing: A Scottish charity providing support and information for LGBTQ+ individuals, including those with health conditions: [lgbthealth.org.uk](https://lgbthealth.org.uk)

Stonewall: The UK's leading charity for LGBTQ+ rights, offering a wealth of resources on health and well-being. Learn more at: [stonewall.org.uk](https://stonewall.org.uk)

## Sexual Health and Intimacy

Terrence Higgins Trust: Offers resources and support for sexual health and well-being, specifically for the LGBTQ+ community. Check out: [tht.org.uk](https://tht.org.uk)

## Online Communities and Support Groups

Ostomy Support Groups UK: A directory of local and online support groups for people living with an ostomy. Find a group at: [ostomy.org.uk/support-groups](https://ostomy.org.uk/support-groups)

LGBTQ+ Ostomy Support (Facebook Group): An online community where LGBTQ+ individuals with ostomies can share experiences and support each other. Join the group by searching “LGBTQ+ Ostomy Support”

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3. NICE. Stoma Care Treatment Summary. Accessed 28/08/2024. Available at: [bnf.nice.org.uk/treatment-summaries/stoma-care](https://bnf.nice.org.uk/treatment-summaries/stoma-care)

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