

# The realities of sex and your skin

## The effects of skin diseases on sexuality

By Kyla LaHaye



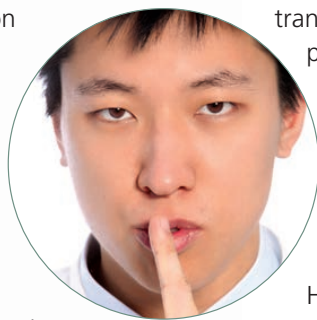
Last year, I was at a plastic surgeon's office inquiring about a procedure when we got into the topic of my rare skin disease, which I had listed on the intake form.

Recognizing an opportunity to talk about the CSPA, I mentioned the CSPA's first-ever Skin Patient Conference and shared some of the program highlights from a discussion on sexuality, on which I was a feature panellist. The surgeon, a bit confused, looked at me and asked, "Would it affect your sexuality?"

I was silent for a few seconds. Was it possible that a physician whose work involves beautifying people couldn't recognize that having a skin condition would affect one's sexuality? This question led to yet another question: if patients with a skin disease could, without judgment, explain how their diseases have affected their sexuality...what would we say?

### Taboo topic?

First of all, let me say that I tried my best to find articles on how skin diseases affect sexuality. As a patient myself, I know how my skin disease has affected mine. I hoped to find articles to validate my experience, and the experiences of other patients. However, other than finding some articles that glossed over the topic and talked mostly about sexually



transmitted infections and painful intercourse due to some skin diseases of the genitalia, my search came up empty. As a result, I decided to ask an expert, Diana Wark of the Calgary Sexual Health Centre:

*"It's like any chronic illness," she told me. "It plays a role in self-esteem right off the start. Something that didn't cause discomfort in the past may now cause discomfort. Also, a new relationship means having to explain what the illness is, what it looks like and how it affects a person. These discussions can be very difficult for people to have."*

Bingo. In fact, having that discussion is so difficult for some patients, they don't have it at all—thus explaining why I didn't find much during my research.

### **Skin diseases: An obstacle to a healthy relationship?**

Low self-esteem due to a skin disease can have major effects on relationships. The affected person may feel disgusted by or ashamed of their own appearance at times, leading them to avoid sexual activity with their partner. This can lead the partner to feel rejected, and reinforces the sexual inadequacy felt by the skin patient. Partners/future partners may become worried that the condition is contagious (even if it's not), and some can even become repulsed by the condition. This can cause the affected partner to go deeper into depression, causing a vicious cycle that can lead to relationship issues.

As Wark mentioned above, singles with skin disease must start any new relationship explaining the condition, which can be embarrassing. Depending on their experiences in previous relationships, some people with a skin disease opt out of relationships altogether, choosing to become celibate and isolated.

However, the opposite can also happen. Some patients have reported

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engaging in casual sex, avoiding emotionally attached relationships in an attempt to shelter themselves from the pain of what they foresee as “inevitable rejection.”

Another disturbing way in which skin disease can affect sexuality was raised during the sexuality panel at the CSPA conference. Some patients said they were “lowering” their standards in partners, withstanding abuse or staying in unhealthy

relationships because they felt they wouldn't be able to attract any better partners. Skin patients may also have feelings of guilt about passing on their condition to their children, since many skin conditions are hereditary. This fear can be so strong that some decide not to have children, which can also affect sexuality.

### **Other factors to consider**

All of this is just the tip of the iceberg. Factor in comorbid conditions such as arthritis, myalgia, depression, alcoholism and numerous other autoimmune conditions, as well as side effects from medications, and it becomes obvious that chronic skin disease can impact sexuality. And normal everyday stressors such as kids, family and careers haven't even been factored in yet! This brings me back to the original question posed by the plastic surgeon. “Does skin disease affect sexuality?” Yes! The bigger question is, why aren't we talking about it? **CS**

*Kyla LaHaye, is a board member of the CSPA as well as a skin patient being treated for Autoimmune Progesterone Dermatitis. Kyla loves helping skin patients and aspires to become a public speaker about her 12 year search for a diagnosis.*

## Who can help?

If your skin problems are affecting your personal relationships...

- **Talk to your doctor.** Explain the extent to which your skin problems are impacting your life.
- **Seek therapy.** Speaking with a specialist in a private setting can provide comfort and help.
- **Open up to family and close friends.** Confiding in loved ones can provide the support you need during this journey.
- **Reach out.** Get in touch with other skin patients. You are not alone.

Join other patients today on [skinergy.ca](http://skinergy.ca) and share your story. This website is private and confidential, and welcomes hundreds of people living with a skin disease. Log on today!