Relationships and dating

Everyone has their own experience of whether Crohn's or Colitis has affected their relationships or dating. This information is here to help you think about:

- Telling a partner about your condition, stoma or fistula
- Feelings or worries you may have when you are in a relationship
- Getting support for relationship issues
- How body image and self-esteem could affect relationships

This information is for everyone with Crohn's or Colitis, whatever your sexuality or relationship status.

When we refer to 'Colitis' in this information we mean Ulcerative Colitis. The research that this information is based on does not include Microscopic Colitis. However, people with Microscopic Colitis may still find this information helpful.

We have separate information on:

- Sex and sexual health
- Reproductive health and fertility
- Pregnancy and birth

Relationships and dating, ed 1

Contents

Key facts about relationships and dating

- Many people living with Crohn’s or Colitis are in intimate, loving and sexual relationships. For some people, their condition can make their relationship feel stronger. But for other people, living with Crohn’s or Colitis can put a strain on their relationship.
- There’s no right or wrong way to tell someone you are dating about your condition, stoma or fistula. Our **Talking Toolkit** could help you find the words to start the conversation.
- Living with Crohn’s and Colitis can affect your body image and self-esteem. There are ways to build up your body image and self-esteem. See the NHS Inform **self-help guide** and the charity Mind’s **tips to improve your self-esteem**.
- Support is available if you’re having difficulties with relationships or dating. The **other organisations** at the end of this resource may be helpful.
- Some people may be eligible for relationship counselling through the NHS. Speak to your GP to find out what may be available to you in your local area.

Dating and new relationships

Telling a partner about Crohn’s or Colitis

There’s no right answer for when to tell someone about your condition. You may find it comes up naturally. Maybe they are living with a condition themselves. And with some people it might not be so easy. You might not feel comfortable talking about your symptoms, or worry about being judged.

> **“It will feel like a big deal to bring up because it is a part of who we are, but people who care about you will be understanding and want to do whatever they can to support you. And in terms of getting to know new people - romantic or otherwise - if you are worried that they may react with insensitivity or immaturity then maybe they aren’t someone you want to let into your life.”**

Elliot

Living with Colitis

You may decide to wait until you know someone better before you tell them. You may even consider whether you need to tell them at all.

> **“I have found opening up about my Colitis quite hard, so I tend not to tell dates early on. But I’ve been in remission for a couple of years now so I don’t feel like I need to tell people – especially if I know it’s only a fling!”**

Rose

Living with Colitis

Even if there are times when you feel embarrassed by your Crohn's or Colitis, it's only one part of who you are. Your best relationships will be with people who see and love you as a whole.

> **"Allow your partner to ask the questions they need to. But if they walk away because of your condition, then they aren't your one. There will be someone who will understand, stand by you and love you."**
>
> **Sarah**
> Living with Colitis

If you're struggling to find the right words, try our Talking Toolkit.

Telling a partner about your stoma

There's no right or wrong way to tell someone about your stoma. You may decide to tell them early on, maybe even before you meet them. This could give you more control over when they find out. If someone acts insensitively because of your stoma, then you know sooner rather than later. Or. telling someone later could show them that there's more to you than your condition.

You could practise how you'd tell them. See our Talking Toolkit for inspiration on how to talk about your stoma.

They might not know what a stoma is, why you have it, or what it means for your future. You could show them our information on life with a stoma. Give them time to try to understand. If you feel comfortable, let them ask you questions about your stoma.

Take it at your own pace. It's not ok for anyone to make you feel uncomfortable about your body or condition. You do not have to talk about the details of your stoma if you do not feel comfortable to.

> **“I felt pressure to fit into a box within the gay community. My box 'gay man with a stoma and lots of scarring' came with its own set of problems. I no longer had the body I thought men wanted and how I had sex would need to change to deal with my new way of life.”**
>
> **Dean**
>
> Living with Crohn’s

There may be some people who cannot see past the stoma. It can be extremely difficult to face rejection. But if someone cannot accept you for who you are and what you have been through, then they may not be the right person for you.

Telling a partner about your fistula

Having a fistula may affect your body confidence. It could be hard to explain to a new partner why you may look a bit different around your bottom or genitals. You could practice how you would tell someone. If you’re nervous about telling them face to face, you could show them our information on fistulas.

If someone makes you feel bad because of your fistula, or any other part of who you are, they may not be someone you want to be with.

> **“The first sexual partner I told about my fistula decided they didn't want to see me anymore because of it. It was very upsetting and massively knocked my confidence. However, as I got through the situation with support from my friends, I realised it was a huge blessing in disguise - why would I want to be with someone like that?! Other people I've told have been so much kinder and understanding. Unfortunately, you might meet some not very nice people on your Crohn's journey, but there are definitely some good ones.”**

Sophie

Living with Crohn’s

Dating tips

Having Crohn’s or Colitis does not have to stop you going on dates. But to help you feel more confident you could try these tips shared by Rose, living with Colitis:

- Check the menus of any restaurants you’re going to beforehand.
- Take your Can’t Wait Card and RADAR key with you.
- Make sure your date happens in a location with toilets nearby.
- Wear comfortable clothes to help with bloating or tummy pain, or clothes that you can easily take off if you need the toilet urgently.
- Suggest a time of day that works best for managing your symptoms, such as earlier in the day if fatigue is worse for you in the evenings.
- Explore date ideas that involve something other than eating and drinking, such as a walk in the park or watching a film.
- Take emergency supplies with you, such as spare underwear, wet wipes, air freshener, perfume or aftershave.
- Take spare medicines with you just in case you go back to the other person’s place after the date.

Casual sex and relationships

Many people enjoy casual sex and relationships at some point in their lives. Lots of the things mentioned in this information, such as telling a partner about your condition or your stoma, also apply to casual relationships. If you are having casual sex, it’s important to use protection to lower your risk of catching sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

There’s no shame in enjoying casual sex. Your healthcare professionals should not judge your sexual choices.

See our information on sex and sexual health for more on:

- STIs
- Talking to healthcare professionals about sex
- Talking to healthcare professionals about sexual identity and gender identity

Long-term relationships

For some people, their condition can help them feel closer to their partner. But for other people, living with Crohn's or Colitis can put a strain on their relationship. There is no right way to approach relationships. This information is here to help you explore what is best for you.

Many people living with Crohn's or Colitis are in secure and loving relationships. Read our blog by Katie and Mat to find out more.

Feeling embarrassed to talk to your partner about your condition

Talking about poo can be hard at the best of times, and even harder if you're trying to create a bit of romance.

If you're finding it hard to start the conversation, our Talking Toolkit may help. You could also show your partner our information on supporting someone with Crohn's or Colitis.

Read Jonathan's blog where he shares his experiences of relationships and intimacy, including the importance of being open and honest.

Not everyone will make the effort to learn about other people's experiences and difficulties. If your partner makes you feel bad or embarrassed about your condition, you may want to ask yourself if they are the kind of person you want to be with.

Feeling uncertain about the future

Uncertainty of how your condition will be in the future is a major worry for many people living with Crohn's and Colitis. You may think "Does my partner know what they're getting themselves into?"

Being open about your worries may help. You could show them our information on Crohn's or Colitis so they can better understand your condition.

Supporting someone with a long-term condition can be hard. Our information on supporting someone with Crohn's or Colitis has tips for partners on how to support you, and how to look after themselves at the same time.

Feeling like a burden

It may feel hard to have your partner look after you when you're unwell. You may feel guilty or embarrassed about the things they are helping with. Or you may feel sad that you have lost some of your independence. Try to be honest about your feelings and worries, and encourage your partner to be open too.

If your partner is struggling to help care for you, you could look for extra support together. You could ask for help from friends and family. Or you may be eligible for other practical or financial help. The NHS has more information on support for carers. You can also contact your local council to find out what support is available in your area: find your local council.

Worries about sex and intimacy

You may be worried about being intimate with your partner. You might not feel able to be as intimate as you want to be. For more on this, see our information on sex and sexual health.

Financial issues

Living with Crohn’s or Colitis can sometimes mean extra costs, such as prescriptions or higher water bills. Money problems may be worse if you are unable to work because of your condition. See our information on finances and benefits for support you could be eligible for.

Getting support for relationship issues

- Some people may be eligible for relationship counselling through the NHS. Counselling is a talking therapy. Speak to your GP to find out what may be available you in your local area.
- You could also try to find a therapist yourself. See the College of Sexual and Relationship Therapists or the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP). The BACP also covers Northern Ireland.

Abusive relationships

No one should feel unsafe in their relationship. If you feel like you are being controlled, pressured or isolated by your partner or ex-partner, this is not ok. Abuse can take many forms, such as physical, emotional, sexual or financial. It can affect relationships with your family or friends.

People living with a disability or long-term condition have a higher risk of experiencing domestic abuse.

Abuse can be hard to spot. See GOV.UK for more on the signs of domestic abuse and how to get support. If you are in immediate danger, call 999.

Body image and self-esteem

- **Body image** is how we think and feel about our own body. It is also how we think others see us.
- **Self-esteem** is how we feel about ourselves as a whole. It is feeling confident about who we are.

Living with Crohn's and Colitis can affect your body image and self-esteem. Having to manage difficult or embarrassing symptoms could affect your confidence.

A poor body image can affect your self-esteem. Your body may have changed, and this can be hard to get used to. Changes to your body could be due to:

- Symptoms or effects of Crohn's or Colitis, such as bloating, weight loss or weight gain, hair loss, skin conditions or fistulas.
- Surgery that has left scarring, or a stoma.
- Side effects of medicines. For example, steroids can cause weight gain, a rounded 'moon' face, growth of body hair or stretch marks.

Poor body image has been linked to depression in people with Crohn's or Colitis. Having long-term obsessive and distressing thoughts about your body can become a symptom of body dysmorphic disorder (BDD). Speak to your GP if you are worried about how your thoughts are affecting you.

If you need someone to talk to, you can call the Samaritans 24 hours a day, 7 days a week on 116 123.

Looking after your mental health is important. Find out how Crohn's and Colitis can affect your mental health, and ways to help in mental health and wellbeing.

Body image and being intimate

Having poor body image and low self-esteem can have a big impact on intimate relationships. If you do not feel good about yourself, you may find it hard to be emotionally or physically intimate with someone else.

When you are dating or getting intimate with someone, you may worry about what they think of your body. These worries may come from outside ideas of what a body should look like. But everyone's body is unique and desirable in its own way. Your body may have been through a lot. You may feel like it has let you down at times. But, you may also feel a sense of pride about how far you have come and what you have been through.

If you're going to have sex, you may feel better talking to the other person about your worries beforehand. You could tell them if you do not like being touched in certain places, or let them know which positions help you feel most confident. Reassure and compliment each other. This could help you both feel more confident about being intimate together.

Some people choose to wear clothing that makes them feel more attractive or body confident.

Boosting your self-esteem

It can be a long and hard process, but there are ways that you can build up your body image and self-esteem:

- NHS Inform has a self-help guide that you can work through to improve your self-esteem.
- The charity Mind has a guide to self-esteem, including tips to improve your self-esteem.

Georgie shares her fears, including body image, and how she overcame them in our blog.

Other organisations

Age UK

The UK's largest charity working with older people.

www.ageuk.org.uk

Advice line: 0800 678 1602

Brook

A charity promoting sex education and wellness. Mainly supports young people, but has information for all ages, genders and sexualities.

www.brook.org.uk

Find a sexual health service: www.brook.org.uk/find-a-service/sexual-health-services-across-the-uk/

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

A professional body with a register of therapists across the UK.

www.bacp.co.uk

01455 883300

Find a therapist: www.bacp.co.uk/about-therapy/using-our-therapist-directory

College of Sexual and Relationship Therapists

A professional body with a register of therapists.

www.cosrt.org.uk

Find a therapist: www.cosrt.org.uk/search-members

Colostomy UK

A charity supporting and empowering people living with a stoma.

www.colostomyuk.org

Helpline: 0800 328 4257

Ileostomy and Ileoanal Pouch Association

A national support group for people living with an ileostomy or internal pouch, their families, friends and carers.

www.iasupport.org

0800 0184 724

Mind

A mental health charity providing information and support.

www.mind.org.uk

Helpline: 0300 123 3393

Refuge

A charity that supports people affected by domestic abuse.

www.refuge.org.uk

National Domestic Abuse Helpline: 0808 2000 247

Switchboard

A UK national LGBTQIA+ support line.

www.switchboard.lgbt

Helpline: 0800 0119 100

Young Minds

Mental health support for young people and their parents and carers.

www.youngminds.org.uk

Help and support from Crohn's & Colitis UK

We're here for you. Our information covers a wide range of topics. From treatment options to symptoms, relationship concerns to employment issues, our information can help you manage your condition. We'll help you find answers, access support and take control.

All information is available on our website.

Helpline service

Our helpline team provides up-to-date, evidence-based information. You can find out more on our helpline web page. Our team can support you to live well with Crohn's or Colitis.

Our Helpline team can help by:

- Providing information about Crohn's and Colitis
- Listening and talking through your situation
- Helping you to find support from others in the Crohn's and Colitis community
- Providing details of other specialist organisations

You can call the Helpline on 0300 222 5700. Or visit our LiveChat service. Lines are open 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday, except English bank holidays.

You can email helpline@crohnsandcolitis.org.uk at any time. The Helpline will aim to respond to your email within three working days.

Our helpline also offers a language interpretation service, which allows us to speak to callers in their preferred language.

Social events and Local Networks

You can find support from others in the Crohn's and Colitis community through our virtual social events. There may also be a Local Network in your area offering in-person social events. Visit our Crohn's and Colitis UK in your area webpage to find out what is available.

Crohn's & Colitis UK Forum

This closed-group Facebook community is for anyone affected by Crohn's or Colitis. You can share your experiences and receive support from others. Find out more about the Crohn's & Colitis UK Forum.

Help with toilet access when out

There are many benefits to becoming a member of Crohn's & Colitis UK. One of these is a free RADAR key to unlock accessible toilets. Another is a Can't Wait Card. This card shows that you have a medical condition. It will help when you are out and need urgent access to the toilet. See our membership webpage for more information. Or you can call the Membership Team on **01727 734465.**

About Crohn's & Colitis UK

Crohn's & Colitis UK is a national charity, leading the fight against Crohn's and Colitis. We're here for everyone affected by these conditions.

Our vision is to see improved lives today and a world free from Crohn's and Colitis tomorrow. We seek to improve diagnosis and treatment, fund research into a cure, raise awareness and give people hope and confidence to live freer, fuller lives.

Our information is available thanks to the generosity of our supporters and members. Find out how you can join the fight against Crohn's and Colitis by calling **01727 734465.** Or you can visit our website.

About our information

We follow strict processes to make sure our information is based on up-to-date evidence and is easy to understand. We produce it with patients, medical advisers and other professionals. It is not intended to replace advice from your own healthcare professional.

You can find out more on our website.

We hope that you've found this information helpful. Please email us at evidence@crohnsandcolitis.org.uk if:

- You have any comments or suggestions for improvements
- You would like more information about the evidence we use
- You would like details of any conflicts of interest

You can also write to us at **Crohn's & Colitis UK, 1 Bishops Square, Hatfield, Herts, AL10 9NE.** Or you can contact us through the **Helpline** on **0300 222 5700**.

We do not endorse any products mentioned in our information.

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