

**VETERAN
HUB**

RESEX

CHANGES IN SEXUALITY

**Among Veterans
with Sensory Impairments**

**A brief overview
of the study**



Sexuality is one of the important components of a person's physical and mental health and an important part of intimate and romantic relationships. After prolonged military service, participation in combat operations and injury/trauma, the sexuality of veterans changes. These changes are part of their overall recovery and require the attention of various stakeholders in the field of veterans' affairs.

This topic remains under-researched globally and in Ukraine. Ukrainian researchers often rely on existing data, studies and the experience of the United States, but overlook important Ukrainian context — a prolonged war, different conditions of return, new types of weapons, varying levels of trust in and recourse to health care, as well as the taboo surrounding sexuality in society.



To collect their own empirical data, the Veteran Hub team conducted the first study on the sexuality of veterans of the Russo-Ukrainian war with injuries in 2023, examining their challenges, partner relationships and barriers to accessing health care. We have now explored the topic in greater depth and studied changes in sexuality among veterans with various sensory impairments, since sensitivity is an important part of sensation, desire and pleasure

We hope this knowledge will help professionals in medicine, rehabilitation and psychosocial support to build effective approaches to restoring sexual health and improving the well-being of veterans after injuries.



Aim of the study

To identify changes in the sexuality of veterans with injuries to the sense organs or insensate areas of the body resulting from combat wounds

Methodology

Given the intimate and sensitive nature of the topic, which requires participants to give an extensive account of their personal experience, we used qualitative methods: semi-structured in-depth interviews and expert interviews. This enabled participants to regulate the depth of their engagement with the topic.

The study involved 27 service members and veterans, including two women, with different types of injuries/trauma and service experience at different stages of the Russo-Ukrainian war (2014–2025). During participant selection, we also applied inclusion criteria such as age, gender, education, place of residence and the presence or absence of a long-term relationship.

We focused on selected components of sexuality and their physical, psychological and social manifestations: body acceptance, libido, changes in sexual life and sensitivity. We identified these components during the analysis of in-depth interviews.

The study is not representative and does not generalise the experiences of individual participants to all service members and veterans.

Key findings

1 **Interest in sexual and reproductive health emerges already at the early stages after injury**

Some veterans begin to worry about sexual function even during evacuation or stabilisation in hospital. In particular, men may check whether their genitals have been injured

2 **At the initial stage after injury, sexuality is understood primarily in physical terms**

Interest in sex is often linked not to the desire for pleasure, but to the need to make sure that the body is functioning and that the genitals are intact

3 **During treatment, veterans gradually become acquainted with their changed bodies**

Those who have partners sometimes attempt to have sex as early as during hospital treatment. This also usually happens not for pleasure, but as a way to verify the physical possibility of intimacy



4 Early provision of information about sexual health after trauma is an important element of rehabilitation

Access to information about sexuality and possible changes in the body can increase veterans' confidence in themselves and support better adaptation after injury

5 Acceptance of bodily changes begins with physical adaptation

Veterans gradually rethink their own embodiment, learn new ways of moving, touching and experiencing pleasure, and get used to scars, amputations, changes in sensitivity or functional limitations. Assistive devices such as prostheses, crutches, or wheelchairs play an important role in this process, as they restore the ability to move independently

6 Acceptance of the changed body is a long-term and non-linear process. Above all, it is a process rather than a result

At the psychological level, it is associated with a reduction in shame, fear of rejection and the feeling of being 'different'

We identified four adaptation strategies in the study:

subjective ranking — comparing one's own trauma in order to assess its impact on life and reduce the intensity of distress

narrativization — shifting attention from bodily injuries to the story behind them

rationalisation — distancing oneself from emotional feelings and reactions related to trauma/injury and moving on to practical questions of future life

visual confrontation — consciously looking at one's new body in the mirror

7

Social acceptance of change is shaped through reactions of those closest to the person

Support from partners and family facilitates adaptation to a new bodily reality, whereas stigmatisation or silencing the topic of sexuality can complicate this process

8

Changes in libido after injury are individual

Most respondents experienced a decrease in sexual desire during treatment due to pain, medication, exhaustion or their psycho-emotional state

9 Sexual practices after injury often require adaptation

Respondents described the need to experiment with new positions, pace and duration of sex, as well as to prepare physically for intimacy

10 Changes in sensitivity affect the way intimacy is experienced

In some cases, other sensations, such as touch or smell, become more important; new erogenous zones may appear, while other areas of the body remain painful. As a result, veterans relearn their own bodies and adapt their interaction to new sensations

11 Physical changes in sensitivity also affect the psychological experience of sexuality

Arousal may rely more on fantasies, imagination or previous bodily experience, while certain scars or areas of the body may trigger traumatic memories or a sense of alienation from one's own body

12 Changes in sexuality also have a social dimension in partner relationships

After injury, veterans often rethink their own sexuality and need open communication with their partner about new bodily boundaries, sensations and needs

Conclusions

Sexuality is an important component of recovery after injury

Issues of sexual and reproductive health arise already at the early stages after trauma and remain significant throughout treatment and adaptation

Injury can change sexuality across several dimensions at once

Physical changes to the body affect libido, bodily sensitivity, the way intimacy is experienced and engagement with a partner in intimate relationships



Adaptation to changes in the body and sexuality is a long-term and complex process

It occurs at the physical, psychological, and social levels and largely depends on support from partners, the close social environment, and access to information

Changes in sexual life may be accompanied by both a sense of loss and a rethinking of intimacy

These transformations often occur in the way a person views sex and intimacy. For some people, emotional closeness and safety become more valuable, others feel nostalgic for their previous experience, while for some sexuality temporarily loses its importance and is accompanied by apathy



**Read the full version of the study
and other materials about the project on our website**



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