

Cancer, Sex, & Sexuality



American Cancer Society

<http://www.cancer.org>

Learn as much as you can about the possible effects your cancer treatment may have on your sexuality.

Talk with your doctor, nurse, or any other member of your health care team. When you know what to expect, you can plan how you might handle those issues.

When you first learned you had cancer, you probably thought mostly of survival. But after a while other questions may have started coming up. You might be wondering “How ‘normal’ can my life be, even if the cancer is under control?” Or even “How will cancer affect my sex life?” It’s important to know that you can get help if you are having sexual problems after cancer treatment. There are many good treatments available.



Sex and sexuality are important parts of everyday life. The difference between sex and sexuality is that sex is thought of as an activity – something you do with a partner. Sexuality is more about the way you feel about yourself as a woman, and is linked to intimacy or your need for caring, closeness, and touch.

Feelings about sexuality affect our zest for living, our self-image, and our relationships with others. Yet patients and doctors often do not talk about the effects of cancer treatment on a woman’s sex life or how she can address problems she’s having. Why? A person may feel uneasy talking about sex with a professional like a doctor or even with a close sex partner. Many people feel awkward and exposed when talking about sex.

This information is for all women who have or have had cancer – regardless of their sexual orientation. We cannot answer every question, but we’ll try to give you enough information to help you and your partner have open, honest talks about intimacy and sex.

For more ideas about talking with your doctor and your cancer care team or for a list of other places to get help go to www.cancer.org.

Food for Thought

Keep in mind that sensual/sexual touching between you and your partner is always possible, no matter what kinds of cancer treatment you’ve had. This might surprise you, especially if you are feeling down or have not had any sexual touching or activity for a while. But it’s true. The ability to feel pleasure from touch almost always remains.

The first step is to bring up the topic of your sex life with your doctor or another member of your health care team. You need to know how your treatment will affect nutrition, pain, and your ability to return to work. You also have the right to know how your treatment could affect your sexual function.





Keeping your sex life going despite cancer treatment

Potential Topics to Explore with your Doctor, Nurse, or Cancer Care Team

- Body changes
- Loss of hair or body part
- Sexual activity after cancer
- Sense of femininity
- Attractiveness to partner (or potential partner)
- Pain/physical discomfort during sexual activity
- Intimacy
- Sexual pleasure
- Talking to partner about sexuality concerns
- Treatment-related sexuality changes

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Keep in mind that, no matter what kind of cancer treatment you have, you'll still be able to feel pleasure when you are touched. Few cancer treatments (other than those affecting some areas of the brain or spinal cord) damage the nerves and muscles involved in feeling pleasure from touch and reaching orgasm. For example, women whose vaginas are painfully tight or dry can often reach orgasm through stroking of their breasts and outer genitals. For people with cancer, sexual touching is often satisfying. Pleasure and satisfaction are possible even if some aspects of sexuality have changed.

Try to keep an open mind about ways to feel sexual pleasure. Some couples have a narrow view of what sexual activity means to them. If both partners cannot reach orgasm through or during penetration, some may feel disappointed. But for people being treated for cancer, there may be times when intercourse is not possible. Those times can be a chance to learn new ways to give and receive sexual pleasure. You and your partner can help each other reach orgasm through touching and stroking. At times, just cuddling can be pleasurable. You could also continue to enjoy touching yourself. Do not stop sexual pleasure just because your usual routine has been changed.

Try to have clear, 2-way talks about sex with your partner and with your doctor. If you are too embarrassed to ask your doctor whether sexual activity is OK, you may never find out. Talk to your doctor about sex, and

tell your partner what you learn. Otherwise, your partner might be afraid that sex might hurt you. Good communication is the key to adjusting your sexual routine when cancer changes your body. If you feel weak or tired and want your partner to take a more active role in touching you, say so. If some part of your body is tender or sore, you can guide your partner's touches to create the most pleasure and avoid discomfort.

Boost your self-esteem. Remind yourself about your good qualities. If you lose your hair, you may choose to wear a wig, hat, or scarf if it makes you feel more comfortable. Some women prefer to wear nothing on their head. You may wear a breast form (prosthesis) if you have had a breast removed. Do whatever makes you feel good about yourself. Eating right and exercising can also help keep your body strong and your spirits up. Practice relaxation techniques, and get professional help if you think you are depressed or struggling.