

It is natural for people who have been diagnosed with cancer to be concerned about the effect on their sexuality. Right after the diagnosis, you may temporarily lose interest in sex as you focus on understanding your cancer and the treatments available. During or after treatment, you may have difficulty accepting the way your body looks or functions and may have fears about your partner's acceptance of the changes.

Managing reproductive issues

If you think you may want to have children after treatment, you may wish to bank eggs or sperm. However, you must do this before you receive your treatment.

Talk to your doctor about your wish to have children in advance so that you can take steps to ensure that you have this choice later.

Possible treatment-related side effects – not all treatments will result in side effects and some may resolve after treatment is completed, others may be long term. Changes in your reproductive abilities or sexuality due to cancer treatment may include:

- Gynecomastia (formation of breast tissue in men)
- Impotence (inability to achieve or sustain an erection)
- Sterility or Infertility
- Reduced sexual desire
- Irregular menstrual cycles
- Menopause and related symptoms
- Vaginal dryness

Sex During Treatment

During treatment birth control should be used to prevent pregnancy. Many of the drugs used to treat cancer can harm a fetus. If you want to get pregnant, talk with your doctor about how long you should wait after treatment is over. Usually it is recommended you wait 6 months after treatment is completed.

We recommend you wear a condom or tell your partner to use condoms while you are getting treatment. You should also use a water based lubricant for comfort.

Having sex will not expose your partner to radiation unless you have an implant that gives off radiation. Talk to your radiation oncologist for more information.

Managing sexual dysfunction

One of the most common problems regarding cancer and sexuality is people's reluctance to talk about it with their sexual partner and their healthcare team. However, communication is the key to coping with this difficult topic. Cancer care specialists are accustomed to addressing these sensitive issues every day and options are available such as occupational therapy and sexual counseling to address certain concerns.

Perhaps more importantly, sharing your thoughts, feelings, and any fears you may have regarding sexual dysfunction with your partner is essential to maintaining an intimate relationship with that person.

Through open communication, you and your partner can work toward finding other ways to express yourselves beyond intercourse, such as touching, holding hands, kissing, hugging, and sharing emotional closeness.

Support a Positive Self-Image

Concerns about the impact of cancer and treatment on sexuality are often closely linked to issues of self-esteem and body image. Cancer treatment often involves surgery which can leave scars and cause physical or neurologic damage. Radiation treatment and chemotherapy can produce side effects such as hair loss and extreme fatigue. These effects and others can strongly influence how a person with cancer feels about his or her body and their sexuality.

These suggestions have helped many people with cancer:

It sounds simple, but looking better may actually help you feel better. Try to maintain the same grooming habits (fashion, hairstyle, and so on) just as you did before your diagnosis.

Plan special activities for both the days when you're feeling well and those when you aren't. Acknowledge that cancer and treatment can cause shifts in mood.

Enjoy the days when you're feeling well. On those days that are difficult, keep a positive outlook.

If you need help with clothes and hair and other aspects of your appearance, don't hesitate to ask for it. The "Look Good...Feel Better" program of the American Cancer Society (ACS), for example, can help.

Sexual Wellness, Reproduction & Community Resources

The ACS publications "Sexuality for Women and Their Partners" and "Sexuality for Men and Their Partners" may also be helpful to you.

Treating reproductive and sexual problems

There are treatments for men with symptoms of low testosterone or erectile dysfunction and treatments available to help women with the symptoms of menopause.

Sexual Wellness Resources

Courtney Hundtoft, OTD.OTR/L
Nebraska Cancer Specialists
NebraskaCancer.com 402.691.6977

Brier Jirka, LIMHP, CPC, CST
Associated Counseling Professionals
APCounseling.com
402.334.1122

Melissa Dahir, DNP Omaha OBGYN
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