

Women's Guide To Sexuality During & After Cancer Treatment

A Guide for Patients/Families



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- Sexuality is a normal and important aspect of health. It includes the physical, psychological, emotional, and social aspects of sexual life. Sexuality during cancer treatment takes into account, how you see yourself, how your partner views you and how do you fulfill your need for sexual relationships during and after cancer treatment.
- While women undergo cancer treatment, it is not uncommon for them to struggle with how they view their body image, having lesser desire for intimacy, and/or finding sexual activity to be painful.
- You should not hesitate to talk about your feelings or ask questions about the impact of treatments on your sexual health. This publication attempts to answer common questions that arise but certainly does not address every question. Talk with your health care providers about your particular situation.

What concerns could arise?

Some women experience a loss in desire for sex, an inability to have an orgasm, experience pain during sexual activity. Sexuality is an important factor in the quality of life. Know that these concerns are common and your healthcare team can provide guidance.

Can I have sex during treatment?

- In general, sexual activity may be permissible during treatment if interest, energy, and comfort levels allow.
- Women may not feel like being sexually intimate post-surgery or during chemo and radiation. At such times hugging, holding hands, and massages may feel good and be comforting
- If you had surgery involving the pelvic area (gynecologic cancers, colorectal and anal cancers), you may need to allow extra time for healing before having sex that involves penetration
- If you have a low white blood cell count or low platelet count (below 50,000) you will need to refrain from any sexual activity that involves penetration due to the increased risk of infection or bleeding
- With chemotherapy drugs, becoming pregnant while on treatment or for a specific time after treatment may be very risky. Ask your doctor for clarification.

Tips for healthy and safe sexual activity

- Be sure to use a reliable form of birth control to prevent pregnancy - even if you think your periods have stopped or your fertility has been affected.
- Chemotherapy can be excreted in secretions for 48-72 hours after a treatment. You should use a barrier during this period to prevent your partner's exposure to chemotherapy. (This includes IV and oral chemotherapy).
- Sexual activity does not have to involve intercourse. kissing, touching, and caressing one another is also important in satisfying one other.
- Have open communication . Talk about what feels good and what doesn't; communicate with your partner when you are tired or uncomfortable.
- Talk with your healthcare team about how to cope with changes in your body image and sexual health. For some, talking with other women with similar problem can help. While for some, more intensive help from a mental health provider, with expertise in working with women with cancer may be necessary.

Practical tips for improving body image

- Exercise: Walking for 30 minutes a day can help boost your image
- Dressing in clothing that makes you feel attractive.
- Beauty techniques using soft makeup, wigs, headscarves can easily be learned to manage side effects of treatment such as facial discoloration, eyebrow and hairloss
- Yoga and relaxation exercises in a quiet, cool, low-lit room.
- Prosthesis under your dress for women with mastectomy is an option

Coping with Vaginal Changes During and After Cancer Treatment

- Chemotherapy may change normal vaginal lubrication due to its direct effects or from inducing premature menopause.
- A water-soluble lubricant allows easier movement with less friction and it washes away easily.
- Avoid Vaseline/petroleum products and skin lotions as they are difficult to wash off and may raise the risk of fungal infection.
- Olive oil has been studied in a trial and achieving effective results.

- Discuss the safety of using estrogen-based creams, rings with your doctor
- Partner's hygiene

Can Cancer be transmitted to my partner through sex?

Breast cancer is not a contagious disease and cannot be transferred through sexual activity. Some cancers are caused by viruses such as liver or cervical cancer. In these cancers, there is a risk of transmission through body fluids.

How to get started again

You've haven't had sex for a period of time and now feel ready to rekindle your sex life. Set the mood- what sparked romance for you and your partner before cancer? Music, a romantic meal, or an evening out may help. Relax and don't pressurise yourself and your partner to have sex on the first go. Take your time, enjoy each other, and most of all, communicate.

Mental Health

Some patients find it difficult to cope with the sexual relationship issues and may need help from a psychologist or psychiatrist. Please talk to your doctor for advice.

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The Aga Khan University Hospital

(021)111-911-911

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