

## Intimacy and Sexuality After Treatment

Cancer and/or drug therapy may have affected your sexuality by causing changes in your sexual function, sexual desire (libido), or your ability to continue the sex life you had before your diagnosis. Even if sexuality had been an important part of your life before treatment, you or your partner may feel differently now.

Healthcare providers may overlook intimacy and sexuality needs. Discuss your concerns with your doctor or nurse. Though it may be uncomfortable to start the conversation, it will be worth it if you learn about ways to improve your relationship and lessen stress.

Cancer and its treatments may have had a big effect on the quality of life for both you and your partner.

### **Concerns about intimacy and sexuality are normal**

Sexuality and intimacy are important aspects of life and cancer may have caused some dramatic changes to your sexuality, sexual functioning, relationships, body image, or sense of self. These changes may be temporary or permanent. Just as your appetite may come and go, your interest in sex may do the same.

It is normal to have questions and important to express your concerns to your healthcare provider. Many people have questions about their sex life during and after treatment, but only a few get the help they need. In a recent study with women who had breast or gynecologic cancers, only 7% asked for advice or medical help for sexuality problems. Yet 42% wanted help or advice.

### **Maintaining and Increasing Intimacy**

After treatment, some couples report more intimacy, an increase in physical closeness (without sexual intercourse), more appreciation of their spouse, and a stronger relationship. Intimacy does not always mean sex. Many couples have found new ways of intimacy, appreciate their partner more, and reported a stronger relationship. They spend quality time together, feel closer to each other, and feel loved.

Try to look at this as an opportunity to try new things and find out how you and your partner can find pleasure and intimacy together.

- Give and receive good, long hugs every day.
- Hold hands. Give each other massages.
- Spend quality alone time together, and talk about things beside cancer.
- Have open, honest discussions about both of your concerns.
- Caress, kiss, and touch
- If you are embarrassed about showing a body part or scar, find different ways to cover them up. Try different positions that make you more comfortable.

## Sexuality

While sexuality can do wonders for your self-image, your body, and your relationships, remember that your 'new normal' may mean you have to try something new. Here are some suggestions from survivors who have maintained or improved the intimacy in their relationship.

- ✓ Having been diagnosed with cancer or having been through treatment does not necessarily mean you have lost interest in sex, but you might. It is important to be honest with your partner.
- ✓ You or your partner may think that sex shouldn't matter or be desired. But sex, and the loving and caring that go with it, can be life-affirming.
- ✓ Sexual desire can range from being not at all interested to having a very active desire for sex. It varies from person to person and over time.
- ✓ Stress, fatigue, pain, hormonal changes, and nausea can lower sexual desire.
- ✓ Try to look at this as a chance to try new things and find out how you and your partner can find pleasure and intimacy together.
- ✓ Some couples report more intimacy, an increase in physical closeness (without sexual intercourse), more appreciation of their partner, and a stronger relationship.
- ✓ You cannot get cancer from kissing, touching, or having sex with someone who has cancer. Sex does not cause cancer to grow faster and it does not increase the chance that cancer will return.
- ✓ Remind your partner how much you love and appreciate them.
- ✓ Take your time—appreciate and enjoy each other and the gift of being able to be fully open.
- ✓ Set the mood – try lighting candles and playing music.



## Coping with Physical Changes

- ✓ Take a warm shower or bath to help relax your body.
- ✓ If you still have fatigue, take a nap before intercourse to help you feel less tired.
- ✓ If you need to take medication to prevent nausea or pain, take it 30 to 60 minutes before sexual activity. Note that some of these medications may interfere with sexual performance. Ask about side effects, alternatives, and dosing options.
- ✓ Some treatments may have caused vaginal dryness in women or erectile dysfunction in men that persists. Talk with your oncology team about using vaginal lubricants and other options to make intercourse more comfortable or to help get or maintain an erection.