

Fertility

A lot of things must go right for a couple to make a baby and a woman to carry a pregnancy to term and have a healthy baby. Cancer and its treatment can affect the ability to get pregnant or father a child in a number of ways. It can:

- disrupt hormone levels
- affect ovulation in women or sperm production in men
- cause erectile dysfunction in men
- make sex uncomfortable or painful

How treatment may have affected your fertility

Chemotherapy can cause primary ovarian insufficiency (POI), which is when a woman's ovaries stop working normally before menopause has occurred. Menstrual periods and fertility may return after treatment has ended or the condition may be permanent. If permanent, it means the woman will not be able to get pregnant and/or will not be able to carry a pregnancy to term successfully.

If chemotherapy has interrupted estrogen production in women or testosterone production in men, both men and women could begin to have symptoms such as hot flashes, night sweats, increased body fat, decreased body hair, and irritability. Women may see irregular or no periods at all. Chemo can also lessen the number of healthy eggs in a woman's ovaries. (Unlike sperm production, which continues throughout a man's life, it is believed that women are both with their lifetime supply of eggs.) Women who are closer to the age of natural menopause may have a greater risk of infertility.

If you have had immunotherapy, talk to your doctor about whether fertility may have been affected.

Radiation therapy in the area of the pelvis can harm reproductive organs. Sometimes it is possible to shield those organs during treatment or surgically remove ovaries out of the radiation field. Radiation to the brain can harm the pituitary gland, the 'master gland' that plays a key role in the production and release of important sex hormones like estrogen and testosterone. The amount of radiation you receive and the part of your body being treated determine whether your fertility is affected.

Surgery in the pelvic area (lower abdomen) can harm reproductive organs and cause scarring, which can affect your fertility. The size and location of the tumor are important factors in whether or not fertility is affected.

Hormone therapy is used to treat certain cancers by blocking or enhancing the effects of some hormones. If the hormones that regulate menstrual cycle or sperm production are affected, fertility

may be damaged. In addition, side effects such as hot flashes, night sweats, and vaginal dryness may occur.

For those who have had a transplant, the high dose chemotherapy given to prepare for the transplant may have damaged their fertility.

Most cancer survivors can still choose to become a parent. It might not happen the way you planned before cancer, but if you can be flexible, you'll find that you have some options. These may include infertility treatment, adoption, or using a donated egg or embryo (sometimes with a surrogate to carry the pregnancy).