

Cancer, intimacy and sexuality

- Cancer and its treatment: Surgery, chemotherapy, or radiation, or their side effects may have an effect on intimate life, sexuality, and sexual health. This impact may be felt through:
 - Physical ability to have intercourse
 - Your perception about your body image and body comfort
 - Range of emotions you might experience: anger, sadness, fear
 - Sexual dysfunction and poor sexual performance
 - Changing relationship roles

It is normal to be concerned about how intimate and physical relationships might be affected by cancer. Sexual life may specifically be affected across:

- general bodily changes leading to negative body image and feelings of insecurity
- diminished sexual interest/arousal, sexual desire
- diminished intensity of orgasm
- pain in the genital area or abdominal/pelvic pain during intercourse

- You might worry about the changes you have gone through with treatment and how your partner views you, about being desirable or compare how you were before cancer to how you are now.
- It would help to keep in mind that attractiveness comes from various aspects and is not only about appearance.
- You might feel the need to take the time to cope with possible bodily changes and recover from different treatment procedures. The time it takes will vary according to what can feel most comfortable to you and your partner.
- Communication can help a lot in caring for a relationship. Being able to talk openly and have honest discussions about fears and worries about sexuality and sexual health concerns can help make you more comfortable together.
- Sharing your concerns with and listening to your partner can help you better understand each other and feel closer. It can also help for example draw out some issues like: changing relationship roles: being sick or becoming a care-giver, changes in desire/interest and what can cause it.
- Of course, there are ways other than sex to be intimate with a partner. Spending quality time together, hugging, cuddling, kissing, foreplay or trying relaxation techniques with your partner

(such as massage for example) can all help you be intimate and take any possible pressure off. This intimacy can ease you little by little into being comfortable with sexuality again.

Here are some common questions about sexuality and cancer:

Can cancer be transmitted to a partner through sexual activity?

Cancer is not a contagious disease. If you have cancer, you cannot “give it” to someone else.

Touching, kissing, or having any form of sexual activity with someone who has cancer will not transmit the disease.

While there are certain types of cervical cancer that are caused by certain types of Human Papilloma Virus –HPV-, the cancer itself is NOT sexually transmitted.

Can cancer get worse if I have sex?

No. Having sex does not worsen the disease; make it spread more or more likely to return.

The affection and care that come with an intimate physical/emotional relationship can actually be helpful for someone with cancer. It may help when a patient is feeling depressed, undesirable, guilty or scared.

Do I have a higher risk of infections from intercourse during treatment?

Chemotherapy might limit your immunity, which could make infections, and bleeding and bruising more likely.

Ask your medical team if you have to take any special care when your blood counts are low.

You should generally make sure to:

Prevent urinary tract infections: Urinating after intercourse helps wash away bacteria which can lead to infection. Washing the genital area before and after sexual activity and staying well hydrated also helps. If you have frequent urinary tract infections after intercourse, you need to consult your physician

If you have a new intimate partner: To avoid any risks of getting a sexually transmitted infection (STI), you or your partner should PRACTICE SAFE SEX, using protection (condom) from beginning to end during sexual activity.

Can I have intercourse if I am taking chemotherapy?

Chemotherapy fluids can be present in sexual fluids within the first seven days of treatment? You should use protection (condom) if you have intercourse during the first week, to avoid any possible risks and keep you and your partner safe.

If you are wearing an infusion catheter or port, be careful not to rub against the dressing or move in a way that might cause a blow to the port/catheter area.

If you are concerned about some symptoms like: Hot flushes or vaginal dryness, vulvovaginal discomfort, sexual dysfunction, consult your medical team for advice.

Can sex be safe if I had surgery or radiotherapy?

Sexual activity is safe when your surgery wound has healed. If you have had surgery for any gynecological cancer, sexual activity (intercourse) should be safe once you have recovered from surgery. Your palliative care team can give you more information.

For radiotherapy, it will depend if you are comfortable with the part of the body treated after radiotherapy. Sometimes your skin in that area may become more sensitive. Communication with your partner will help talk about what makes you most comfortable.

If you are receiving internal radiotherapy, you should also use protection (condom). Ask your medical team for more information.

Can I get pregnant if I have intercourse during treatment?

Though chemotherapy may cause short-term or longer term subfertility or infertility, it is important to avoid getting pregnant during treatment. Treatment like chemotherapy may be absorbed and might affect a developing embryo and the course of pregnancy. If you are trying for a baby, it is safest to do so a year after treatment, during which the cancer is most likely to return.

Different methods can help preserve fertility in case of cancer treatment, such as egg freezing and sperm banking. If you are concerned about how to, consult your medical team for more information.

How can I deal with not feeling good about my body, but wanting be intimate with my partner..?

You may feel uncomfortable with changes in your looks or body from cancer treatment. Communicating and talking to your partner can be relieving and help you cope better. You will also notice your partner will be less concerned by these changes in your appearance than you thought he/she would be. Significant others will not consider you a different person.

When these issues are discussed openly, you will hopefully feel more reassured and more comfortable about them.

Often tiredness prevents me from being intimate with my partner; can I do something about it?

Physical activity can help break the cycle of tiredness caused by cancer and its treatment: lack of energy leading to lack of mobility which might cause even less energy. One of the most effective ways to do this is exercise: even as little as 10 minutes of exercise can help, you could also try remaining active within your daily routine. Being intimate at the time of day when you feel the least tired or at your best can help as well, most patients feel the least tired in the morning.

With some types of cancer, like bladder or cervical cancer, bleeding can happen sometimes in the genital or urinary tract area. Consult your medical team if you see more blood after intercourse, you may have to wait until the bleeding stops or the area heals.