



# Sexual Health during Cancer Treatment

*Sex is a normal and important part of life. Your healthcare team wants your life to be as normal as possible during cancer treatment. Different types of treatment (chemotherapy, surgery, or radiation) can cause different sexual side effects. Your healthcare team is open to talking to you about your specific issues and concerns. This is some general information regarding sex during cancer treatment.*

## **SAFETY FIRST**

All cancer treatments are stressful to your body, and may make you at risk for infections. This guidance focuses on keeping you safe if you choose to remain or become sexually active during your treatment time.

- **Use a condom for vaginal, anal, or oral sex.**
  - It is important to prevent pregnancy if you are or may be treated with chemotherapy or radiation. These treatments are known to put an unborn baby at high risk for birth defects.
  - Chemotherapy (IV or pill form) is in body fluids, including semen, of people who receive it. Only people with cancer need their body to be exposed to chemotherapy. Protect your partner from exposure to chemotherapy by wearing a barrier device, such as a condom, during and for 48 hours after each treatment.
- **“Casual sex” is not a good idea. A stable, committed partner who does not have other partners is best and safest for you.**
- **Be aware of and look for any sores, bumps, warts, or white/greenish fluid on your partner’s genitals.**
  - Do not have sex until you confirm these signs are not from a sexually transmitted infection.
- **If you have low blood counts (white blood cells and platelets), there is a risk for infection or bleeding with vaginal, oral, or anal penetration.**
  - Use liberal amounts of a water-based or silicone-based lubricant. This will help decrease small tears in the vagina or anus that may bleed or get infected.
    - Do NOT use lotion, oil, or petroleum jelly for lubrication as they weaken latex condoms.

For men and women, stress, fatigue, and having little interest in sex is common and completely normal during cancer treatment. If this is true for you, your interest in sex will likely return after completion of therapy.

## **SEXUAL ISSUES THAT MAY BE EXPERIENCED BY WOMEN**

- Vaginal changes
  - These changes may be due to premature menopause caused by chemotherapy, radiation, or surgery.
    - Vaginal dryness and painful intercourse may result. Using vaginal moisturizers (daily or every other day to maintain a moist environment) and water-based or silicone-based lubricants during a sexual encounter may help.
    - Hormone replacement therapy may be an option. Talk to your healthcare team to determine if hormone replacement is right for you.
  - Changes may occur due to the formation of scar tissue as a result of surgery and/or radiation.
    - Scar tissue typically develops as healing occurs, but it is important to keep your vaginal canal open, not only for sex, but also for future pelvic exams. This can be accomplished with use of a vaginal dilator or frequent vaginal sex (approximately 3 times per week).
  - If you had radiation, you may experience any of these vaginal changes. In addition, it is helpful to know that sex is okay unless significant bleeding occurs or it is painful.
  - You will still be able to feel touch, pleasure, and have orgasms.

## **SEXUAL ISSUES THAT MAY BE EXPERIENCED BY MEN**

- Erectile dysfunction (ED)
  - ED may be caused by nerve and/or blood vessel damage as a result of surgery and/or radiation to the pelvis, prostate, or bladder.
  - This may mean having difficulty achieving or maintaining erection. Your ability to get and sustain an erection may change over time.
  - Medical treatments are available. Talk to your healthcare team to determine if these options are right for you.
  - You will still be able to feel touch, pleasure, and have orgasms even if you are not able to have a full or partial erection.

**ASK YOUR DOCTOR OR NURSE ANY QUESTIONS YOU HAVE ABOUT SEX. WE ARE HERE TO HELP YOU AND YOUR PARTNER DURING THIS TIME.**