

Navigating Sexual Health During and After Cancer Treatment



What to expect

Sexual health is an important part of life which can be affected by physical, emotional, mental and social well-being. While sex does not interfere with the cancer treatments themselves, it is common to experience a lowered sex drive while on treatment. This is usually because of treatment side effects, fatigue or feelings of anxiety and depression. Fortunately, there are many different strategies to help with those concerns. Prior to engaging in sexual activities, please check with your oncology provider to learn about any safety sexual health precautions that need to be taken while undergoing treatment.

What does sex mean to you?

One essential step is to redefine what sex means for you. Physical intimacy and sharing love with your partner does not always have to lead to penetrative sex or an orgasm. Here are a few suggestions to improve your sexual experience:

- Explore options to improve connection such as sensual touching, kissing, cuddling, etc.
- Block out set times to create a safe space where intimacy and comfort can grow.
- Do not set goals, but instead focus on being sensual and present with your partner.

While on treatment, it is advised to use a contraception during sexual intercourse to avoid pregnancy. The use of a barrier method, such as a condom, is recommended.

Emotional Concerns

- Relaxation techniques and breathing exercises can help to become relaxed and increase sexual responsiveness.
- Talking with a Counselor can help one learn new techniques to handling emotions.

Mobility/Fatigue Concerns

- Modify your sexual activity to conserve energy, for example:
 - Use positions that involve less thrusting.
 - Consider using a sexual health device (such as a vibrator).
 - Engage in intimacy exercises by yourself or with your partner.
- Consider using props to assist with positioning or purchasing a sling or swing for assistance.
 - *Pillow: A special wedge pillow for sex that supports you at every angle.*
 - *Intimate Rider: A website that has a variety of sexual health device for those who may have limited mobility.*

Vaginal Dryness Concerns

Cancer treatment can often cause vaginal atrophy, also known as vaginal dryness. There are several options for the treatment of vaginal dryness that are safe, including non-hormonal options.

As your oncology provider for further details and a referral to the **Women's Oncologic Sexual Health Clinic** for personalized treatment if you are experiencing vaginal dryness or pain with intercourse.

Post-Treatment Therapies

- Pelvic Floor Physical Therapy
 - *Pelvic floor exercises can help patients to have an increased awareness of any tension in the muscles surrounding the entrance of the vagina, which may cause pain during penetration. Sometimes this tension can occur without one being aware of it. Working with a pelvic floor therapist can help the pelvic floor to relax and become able to accept penetration again.*

Vaginal Dilator Therapy

- Vaginal scarring is expected after radiation to the pelvic or vaginal tissue. This can be prevented by doing vaginal dilator therapy. **It is important to maintain an open vaginal canal for medical exams and sexual intercourse.**
- Approximately 4 weeks after completion of radiation, a patient will be scheduled with the **Women's Oncologic Sexual Health Clinic** for evaluation.
 - *During the evaluation, a pelvic exam is performed to assess for vaginal healing after treatment is performed. A personalized plan to prevent vaginal scarring will be developed with consideration of the patient's personal health value system and long-term health goals.*
 - *Do not start dilator therapy until after evaluation in the Women's Oncologic Sexual Health Program.*