

What are cancer-related sexuality changes?

Cancer treatments can cause physical symptoms and side effects that can change your comfort, interest, desire and ability to be intimate or engage in sexual activity. Side effects from treatment may include nausea, changes in bowel function, sleep, fatigue and nerve damage. These things can affect your sexual desire, genital arousal (vaginal lubrication and erection) or your ability or interest to reach orgasm.

Changes to how you look:

- Cancer treatments may also change your body's appearance. Changes such as loss of hair, skin changes, alterations in your weight or scars from surgery
- Sometimes these changes can affect what you think and how you feel about your body
- Your body image is very important and can affect your desire for intimacy

Coping with emotions:

- Emotional distress, anxiety and depression, and the medications used to treat these conditions, can also affect sexuality and the desire for intimacy
- Emotions not only impact you mentally, but can also affect your sexual response
- Emotions can also affect your relationship with your partner
- For example if you are worried about your future, money or taking part in family life, you may have a lessened desire for intimacy

What can I do to manage my sexuality changes?

1. Talk with your partner

Open, honest communication between you and your partner is an important step to getting started with sex again. Share your feelings with each other – this is often the first step to finding problems and helpful solutions. You both need to talk about your feelings and listen to each other.

When talking about sex or sexuality:

- Talk about your fears or worries rather than trying to hide or avoid them
- If you have pain or tenderness, tell your partner
- Let your partner know if you don't feel like having sex and why you feel this way
- Let each other know when you're interested in sex or other ways of showing affection
- Go slowly at first. Start with lots of closeness, hugging and other things that you feel comfortable with. These physical displays of affection can help you and your partner become physically close without having sex
- Be patient. It may take time for you to become aroused

2. Talk to your healthcare team about sexual changes

Support from your healthcare team can help you understand the changes that are happening in your body. Don't be embarrassed to ask your healthcare team if and when it's safe to have sex or if you need to take any safety measures.

Sexual changes for women:

- Vaginal dryness → is when the vagina doesn't make the normal amount of moisture or lubrication
- Vaginal stenosis → is when the vagina becomes narrower and shorter

Sexual changes for men:

- Painful ejaculation → certain treatments can lead to pain during ejaculation
- Erectile dysfunction (ED) → is when you are unable to get and keep an erection firm enough to have sex

3. Talk to your healthcare team about treatment options

Once the type and cause of the sexual problem is known, your healthcare team can suggest ways to manage it.

Treatment options for women:

- Try different positions. Deep pelvis thrusts may be painful for women with vaginal stenosis. Try exploring other positions that may be more comfortable.
- Use lubricants. For vaginal dryness use water soluble lubricants like K-Y Jelly, Repagyn, Astroglide or Replens. Do NOT use Vaseline or other oil based lubricants as they irritate the vagina
- Vaginal dilators may be used to stretch vaginal tissues and to prevent the vagina from shrinking. When the dilator is in place, it feels much like a large tampon

Treatment options for men:

- Physiotherapy may be able to help with painful orgasms. They can teach you exercises that stretch the pelvic floor muscles and return their tone to normal
- Prescription medications are available to treat erectile dysfunction. Each medicine has side effects and should be used as directed

4. Become informed

- During **seven days after each** chemotherapy treatment, men should wear a condom when having intercourse. This will protect your partner from exposure to chemotherapy from bodily fluids.
- For both men and women of childbearing age, it is important to avoid pregnancy while on chemotherapy. Cancer treatments may have negative effects on a developing fetus.
- Cancer is not contagious. You can't get cancer from kissing, touching or having sex with someone with cancer
- Having sex does not cause cancer to grow faster and it does not increase the chance of cancer coming back