



Sexuality and Cancer

Intimacy and sexuality are very important to us as human beings. While you are receiving chemotherapy treatments the way that you define yourself and your sexuality may be challenged. This is a normal part of adapting to what is going on in your body and environment.

Cancer and cancer treatments can cause a variety of sexual changes. These changes can be in the form of decreased desire, decreased arousal and decreased ability to experience an orgasm. The most common change is overall loss of desire. Do not be afraid or embarrassed to ask your health care team about sexual changes that may occur.

Additional problems for men are difficulties obtaining and maintaining an erection. Barrier protection such as condoms should still be used during chemotherapy as pregnancy could still occur. You may need to continue barrier protection for 1-2 weeks after your last treatment.

Additional problems for women can be vaginal dryness and pain with sexual activity. Vaginal lubricants and moisturizers can be purchased over-the-counter. These products do not contain hormones and should not have side effects. Moisturizers should be used daily. Lubricants are designed to reduce friction and discomfort from dryness during sexual activity. Oil based lubricants such as petroleum jelly, baby or mineral oil may damage latex condoms and diaphragms. Polyurethane condoms can be used with oil-based products. Lubricants that are made with water or silicone can be used with latex condoms or diaphragms.

It is common to require more stimulation for both men and women to achieve an orgasm. Most patients are still able to achieve orgasm even if cancer treatment interferes with erections or vaginal lubrication.

It is usually safe to have sex during cancer treatment unless your doctor tells you not to.

During chemotherapy you should use barrier protection such as condoms or dental dams (for oral sex) as chemotherapy chemicals can be found in semen or vaginal fluid. It is recommended you take these precautions for 7 days following a treatment.

Efforts should be taken to avoid pregnancy as most chemotherapy treatments are known to cause birth defects. Chemotherapy may also be found in breast milk, discuss with your provider whether or not you should avoid breast feeding.

Radiation therapy from external machines do NOT make you radioactive or endanger your partner. If you have radioactive implants/seeds or are undergoing brachytherapy you may need to stop sexual activity briefly until the strongest radiation has left the body.

If you have low platelets from your treatment or underlying illness you may be prone to bleeding during sexual activity.

While most sexual changes will improve slowly over time, some changes may be long-term or permanent.