

Sexual Health During Breast Cancer Treatment

Breast cancer can cause physical and emotional changes. It can change how you feel about sex and closeness with your partner. Research shows that 7 out of 10 cancer survivors list sexual function as a concern.

Sexuality is more than sex with a partner. Sexual health is a key part of your quality of life at any age. It includes:

- The way you feel about yourself
- Your zest for living
- Your self-image
- Your relationships with others

How Cancer Affects Sexuality

- Pain
- Treatment or medicine side effects
- Hormone loss from treatment could cause menopause symptoms
- Concerns about changes in the way you look:
 - Hair loss
 - Changes in weight
 - Loss of a breast or breasts
 - Surgical scars
- Emotional distress including:
 - Depression
 - Anxiety
 - Fear
 - PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder)
 - Grief

Sexuality

Sexuality is different for everyone. Enjoyment of sexual activities may be changed in these ways:

- Fatigue (feeling tired)
- Loss of desire
- Change in feeling sexual excitement and pleasure because your nipple is gone or your breast feels different when touched
- Trouble reaching orgasm

It Is Okay to Talk to Your Doctor

Sexual health is a very private and personal matter. You may feel uneasy talking about sexual health. Your nurse or doctor can give you ideas to help. They can make referrals to specialists that may help you with your sexual health.

It is okay to ask questions like these:

- How will my cancer affect my ability to have sex?
- Can sex during treatment be harmful to my partner?
- Are there times when I should avoid having sex?
- I am too tired to have sex. Is there anything I can do to decrease my fatigue?
- I do not think about sex or feel interested in sexual activity. Why do I feel this way? Is there anything I can do?
- Are any of my medicines causing sexual side effects? Are there other medicines to try?

Things to Try

There are many ways to give relief of symptoms and improve your sexual health. (Note: Talk to your doctor before using any products):

- Use lubricants or vaginal moisturizers
- Talk with someone about any negative thoughts. A counselor, friend, or partner could help you:
 - Change negative thoughts
 - Cope with changes in how you look
 - Find a new sense of self
- Talk with your partner about what you are feeling. Allow your partner to openly share their concerns with you. Give yourself and your partner time to adjust. Together, explore:
 - New ways of being intimate
 - Comfortable positions
 - Rebuild your self-esteem
 - What feels good
- See a gynecologist to talk about things like menopause symptoms and pain when having sex.
- You may want to see a sex therapist
- Talk with other cancer survivors (American Cancer Society's Cancer Survivors Network)

Additional Resources

- American Cancer Society: www.cancer.org
 - Search for Sexuality for the Woman with Cancer
- Gay & Lesbian Medical Association: www.glma.org
- LIVESTRONG: www.livestrong.org
- National Cancer Institute: www.cancer.gov
- Young Survivor Coalition: www.youngsurvival.org