



CANCERcare®

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fact sheet

INTIMACY DURING AND AFTER CANCER TREATMENT

The physical impact of cancer and cancer treatments can affect how you relate to a romantic partner. Your sense of physical or emotional closeness within the relationship may go through unexpected changes. Sharing your feelings openly and honestly is an important first step in ensuring good communication with your partner, which will allow you both to understand and work through any issues together.

CHANGES THAT CAN OCCUR DURING AND AFTER TREATMENT

The following changes can occur for men:

- Inability to get or maintain an erection
- Pain during sex
- Decrease or loss of sexual desire
- Ejaculation and orgasm problems which may include premature ejaculation or urination during ejaculation

The following changes can occur for women:

- Vaginal dryness
- Pain during sex
- Inability or difficulty having an orgasm
- Numbness
- Decrease or loss of sexual desire
- Early menopause

TALK TO YOUR DOCTOR ABOUT INTIMACY

Prepare yourself for any physical changes during treatment by having your doctor explain what these changes may be. During and after treatment, inform your health care team about changes in sexual health as they may be able to recommend options to reduce discomfort. It is also important to consult with your doctor before being sexually active. Intimacy may involve a level of physical activity which should be addressed with your doctor.



TALK TO YOUR PARTNER OR SPOUSE

Opening a conversation about your concerns with your partner is an important first step. Many partners/spouses need reassurance that the person with cancer still has an interest in being intimate, and vice versa. Interest is not only about physical attraction, it also stems from how you both think and feel about the relationship. Your partner may be concerned that expressing a wish to be intimate again will be a source of stress and upset for both of you. Being open about these concerns is the best way to examine and explore these feelings together.

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Be honest. Being upfront about your feelings can encourage your partner to be honest about their feelings as well. Good communication is an essential and necessary part of any relationship as you both navigate the many unknowns of the cancer experience.

Talk about the physical closeness you need. Share how you feel about your body. You may be self-conscious about a scar or you may be coping with treatment side effects. Whatever your needs are—whether you feel a need for physical affection, or whether you are not yet interested in being physically intimate—let your partner know. Your partner is most likely waiting for your signal to know what to do, how to act and what you need.

Let yourself feel loved and cared for. Changes in our bodies, no matter what age, can be difficult. Practice praising yourself about any of the things you like about yourself, such as your intelligence, your faith, your laugh, your kindness and other positive qualities.

GET SUPPORT

Join a support group. A cancer diagnosis and caregiving can feel like a solitary experience. You may feel that a cancer diagnosis is yours alone to cope with and perhaps feel the need to isolate yourself. Talking to others who have similar concerns can be helpful. Support groups provide a chance to meet and interact with other people who can understand your experience. An oncology social worker can help someone living with cancer and their partner or spouse cope with this “new normal.” CancerCare offers free face-to-face, telephone and online support groups led by professional oncology social workers.

An oncology social worker can help. Remember, you do not have to walk this path alone. Oncology social workers understand the complex issues that can arise with cancer and intimacy. CancerCare’s professional oncology social workers can help anyone affected by cancer, free of charge. To speak with a professional oncology social worker, call 800-813-HOPE (4673).

CancerCare® Can Help

Founded in 1944, CancerCare is the leading national organization providing free support services and information to help people manage the emotional, practical and financial challenges of cancer. Our comprehensive services include case management, counseling and support groups over the phone, online and in-person, educational workshops, publications and financial and co-payment assistance. All CancerCare services are provided by master’s-prepared oncology social workers and world-leading cancer experts.

To learn more, visit www.cancercares.org or call **800-813-HOPE (4673)**.

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