

Cancer treatment can affect your desire or ability to be physically intimate. This can impact your relationship with your spouse or partner. This fact sheet covers the following:

- Changes that might happen to a person during treatment
- Talking with your doctor about intimacy
- Being open and honest with your sexual partner
- Getting care and support



Changes That Can Occur Because of Treatment

Cancer and its treatment can cause changes to the body of the person with cancer.

The following changes can occur for men:

- Loss or decrease in sexual desire
- Inability to get or maintain an erection
- Pain during sex
- Ejaculation or orgasm problems which may include premature 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

It is important to talk with your doctor before being sexually active. Intimacy may involve a level of physical activity the doctor should know about. The medical team can prepare you for any physical changes that may arise during and after treatment, and recommend options to reduce discomfort. By speaking with your medical team, it may reduce feelings of anxiety around sex and raise levels of comfort with your partner.



Be Open With Your Partner or Spouse

Talk with your partner. Starting the conversation with your partner is an important first step to discuss intimacy concerns. Many partners need reassurance that the person with cancer still has an interest in them. You may also feel the same. Your partner may worry that expressing a wish to be intimate again may create a source of stress and discomfort for both of you. It is best to be open and explore these feelings together.

Be honest with your partner. Being truthful about your feelings towards intimacy can help your partner to be honest, too. Good communication is a necessary part of any relationship.

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 can be difficult, no matter what age we are. Practice having compassion for yourself about any of the things you like about yourself, such as your intelligence, your faith, your laugh, your kindness and other positive qualities.

Be patient with yourself. The effects of cancer and treatment are not your fault. Be gentle with yourself and your body. Adjusting to treatment side effects and the emotional and physical changes of a cancer diagnosis is a personal experience. It is okay not to feel “ready” to be intimate.



Get Support When Needed

Join a support group. The effects of cancer can make you feel isolated and alone. Support groups are a chance to meet other people who understand your experience. CancerCare offers free support groups led by professional oncology social workers.

An oncology social worker can help. You are not going through this alone. Oncology social workers understand the difficult issues that come cancer and intimacy. CancerCare’s professional oncology social workers can help anyone affect by cancer, free of charge. Call 800-813-HOPE (4673) for help.

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 resource navigation, 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.cancercare.org or call **800-813-HOPE (4673)**.

Facebook: facebook.com/CancerCare | **Instagram:** @CancerCareUS | **Twitter:** @CancerCare



Edited by Cassie Spector, LMSW

This fact sheet is supported by the Anna Fuller Fund, Bristol Myers Squibb and a grant from Genentech.