

Maintain Your Sexual Health During and After Cancer Treatment



Maintaining Intimacy between You and Your Partner

You may be thinking: “I’ve just had treatment for cancer, I can’t think about this right now!” However, as you move forward you may want to understand how cancer treatment has affected your sex life. More concerns may arise in the months following treatment and/or surgery. Sexual activity is a source of enjoyment and an opportunity for closeness for many people, including women living with and recovering from cancer.

This information sheet prepares you for some physical and emotional changes that may affect your sexual health and suggests ways you can improve sex and intimacy with your partner.

Ways to Enhance Sexuality

Boost Your Self-Esteem

Some women struggle with body image after treatment. Issues like hair loss or feeling “less feminine” are common. Wearing wigs and make-up can help some women improve their body image. Changing diet and exercise may also help increase one’s self-esteem.

It is also common to feel depressed or anxious following a cancer diagnosis and treatment. Talking with a member of your treatment team can help. You do not have to cope alone.

Changes from Treatment That Affect Sexual Health

You may experience the following changes as a result of your cancer treatment. You should talk with your treatment team about any questions you may have.

Emotional Changes

- Lack of sexual desire
- Decreased self-esteem
- Depression
- Anxiety

Physical Changes

After hysterectomy with or without ovary removal:

- Thinning of vaginal wall
- Vaginal shortening
- Reduced vaginal stretch
- Increased vaginal dryness

Chemotherapy:

- Hair loss
- Fatigue/weakness

Radiation:

- Leaking urine and/or stool
- Narrowing of the vagina
- Sore rectal and/or vaginal skin

The Images Boutique, located on the second floor of the Yawkey Center, sells special products to help you look and feel your best.

Change Up Your Routine

Penetration (an object, tongue or penis inserted into the vagina) can be painful for some women after treatment. Talk with your partner about sex and when it hurts or feels good. Increasing how long you touch and kiss before sex can help to make the vagina softer and more “wet.” This can make sex more pleasurable.

Some sexual positions allow you to control for depth, such as being on top or side by side. Talk to your partner if sex still hurts. Emphasize the power of intimacy, and the importance of touching, stroking and cuddling. Intimacy and pleasure can be possible, even if penetration is difficult.

Increase Vaginal Moisture

Lubricants Water and silicone-based lubricants help to make penetration more comfortable. They are available over the counter and can increase sexual pleasure. Apply lubricant to both partners’ genitals before sex.

Vaginal Moisturizer Vaginal moisturizer is absorbed into the skin and acts like natural vaginal secretions by maintaining moisture. It can be applied at any time and effects last for 3–4 days. It is used for daily comfort. Do not use petroleum jelly (Vaseline®) or other skin lotions for vaginal lubrication. These products may cause itchy vaginal yeast infections. They can often also break down latex in condoms, making them tear or break.

Vaginal Estrogen Therapy Some women use vaginal hormones, such as estrogen, to help reduce vaginal dryness. They come in rings, gels, creams, and tablets. Vaginal hormones can also help to:

- thicken fragile vaginal skin
- keep a balanced environment in the vagina that protects against infection

Do not apply vaginal estrogen right before oral sex or any kind of penetration. Your partner should not be exposed to a large amount of estrogen hormone. Talk with your doctor to see if vaginal estrogen is right for you.

Increase Vaginal Stretch

Sometimes after treatment, especially radiation, the vagina becomes narrow, short and inflexible. This can make sex painful. Vaginal dilators are tools used with lubrication that slowly stretch out the vagina. Ask your treatment team if vaginal dilators are right for you. You can also ask your team for a referral to a pelvic floor therapist.