

Massachusetts General Hospital BMT Survivorship Program

Maintain Your Sexual Health During and After Bone Marrow Transplantation: Women

Key Messages:

- Cancer treatment and bone marrow transplantation can cause physical and emotional changes that affect a woman's desire and ability to have sex.
- It is important to manage side effects that cause sexual problems. Please speak openly with your health care team about your sexuality and intimacy concerns, even before treatment starts, as there are ways to cope with these concerns.
- There are several ways you and your partner can get support for sexual concerns, including working with a sexual health expert and talking to your doctor, social worker or a psychologist.

Ways to Enhance Sexuality:

Boost your self-esteem and manage emotional changes:

Some women struggle with body image or feeling 'less feminine' after treatment. Healthy eating and exercise may help raise one's self-esteem. Wearing wigs and make-up can help improve body image.

A Look Good Feel Better Workshop is hosted monthly in the Cancer Center and offers hair and skin care tips. The Images Boutique, located on Yawkey 9B, sells special products to help you look and feel your best.

It is also common to feel depressed or anxious after bone marrow transplant. Relieving emotional side effects is just as important for your sexual health as relieving physical side effects. You do not have to cope alone. Your oncology social worker can help you form better ways to cope and refer you to community resources.

Change up your Routine:

Penetration (an object, tongue or penis inserted into the vagina) can be painful for some women after treatment. Talk to your

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.

- Decrease or loss of sexual desire
- Inability or difficulty achieving sexual arousal or orgasm
- Pain during sex
- Increased unpleasant sensation or numbness in the genitals

These problems can be due to many of the changes your body goes through during treatment including:

Emotional Changes:

- Decreased self-esteem
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Stress
- Fear of recurrence
- Sadness
- Changes in appearance that affect your body image

Physical Changes:

After bone marrow transplantation:

- Thinning of vaginal wall
- Increased vaginal dryness
- Reduced vaginal stretch
- Chronic graft-versus-host disease
- Vaginal scarring
- Increased skin sensitivity in the genitals

Chemotherapy changes:

- Hair loss
- Fatigue/ weakness
- Premature menopause
- Sex hormonal deficiencies

partner about when sex hurts or feels good. Increasing how long you touch and kiss before sex can help to make the vagina softer and more “wet”.

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. Know the importance of touching, stroking, and cuddling. Intimacy and pleasure can be possible, even if penetration is difficult.

Increase Vaginal Moisture:

Lubricants: 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: maintains moisture. It can be applied at any time and effects last for 3-4 days.

Do not use petroleum jelly (Vaseline) or other skin lotions. 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 estrogens. They come in rings, gels, creams, and tablets. Vaginal hormones can also help to:

- Thicken fragile vaginal skin
- Keep 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 learn more.

Vaginal treatment for chronic graft-versus host disease: Chronic GVHD can cause dryness, scarring and pain with penetration. There are treatments that can be applied to the vagina such as local steroids or other creams, which can help treat chronic graft-versus-host disease. Talk with your doctors to learn more.

Increase Vaginal Stretch: Sometimes after treatment, 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.

Muscle Exercises: Exercising pelvic muscles can help keep muscles relaxed and reduce pain during sex. Ask your treatment team if vaginal muscle exercises are right for you.

Resources

- The Mass General Oncology Sexual Health Clinic (Yawkey 9E) team can help to create a treatment plan that fits your needs and situation. Contact: Call 617-724-4800.
- American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors, and Therapists: Locate an expert: www.aasect.org/referral-directory
- LIVESTRONG Foundation: Female Sexual Health after Cancer www.livestrong.org/we-can-help/finishing-treatment/female-sexual-health-after-cancer/
- National Cancer Institute: Facing Forward After Cancer Treatment www.cancer.gov/publications/patient-education/facing-forward
- American Cancer Society: <https://www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/physical-side-effects/fertility-and-sexual-side-effects.html>
- Cancer.Net Dating, Sex and Reproduction www.cancer.net/coping-and-emotions/sexual-and-reproductive-health
- Dating and Intimacy after Cancer: <http://www.cancer.net/coping-and-emotions/sexual-and-reproductive-health/dating-and-intimacy>