Common Sexual Concerns

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Watch the Moving Forward video on Dating and Sexuality [2], adapted from this content.

Some cancers and cancer treatments cause physical and emotional changes that may alter your sexuality, desirability, and how you feel about your body. These feelings, in turn, often affect your relationships, whether you have a partner or are dating. Dating and relationships are very important at this point in your life, and it can be difficult to see friends enter relationships, get married, and have children, especially when you feel unattractive and wonder if you are able to have children in the future. Because sexuality is an important part of life for young adults, it is important to understand potential sexual side effects and learn ways to cope with these changes.

Common changes and concerns that affect sexuality

It is normal for cancer and its treatment to affect your sex life. Even if the treatment doesn?t directly affect your reproductive organs (for example, the removal of a testicle in men or the ovaries in women), it can affect your mood, energy levels, and overall sense of well-being. All cancer treatment, such as surgery, radiation therapy, and chemotherapy, often cause a variety of side effects that can affect your sexuality. These include:

- Fatigue
- Pain
- Stress, either by you or your partner
- A change in hormone levels
- A decrease in libido (sex drive)
- Inability to achieve or maintain sexual arousal
- Not feeling good about your body [3] and general appearance, including scars, hair loss, skin changes, or just a general feeling of not being yourself
- Pain during intercourse
- Worry about your partner?s acceptance of your body changes or differences
- Other physical changes to your sexual organs, such as vaginal dryness in women or a loss of erection in men
- Reproductive health issues, such as infertility (the inability to father a child or become pregnant) and pregnancy concerns

Learn more about coping with fatigue [4], cancer-related pain [5], and managing stress. [6]

Coping with sexual concerns

The following suggestions may help you cope with common sexual concerns during or after cancer treatment:

- Before treatment begins, ask your doctor or another member of the health care team what changes to expect, so you know what to expect and how to prepare. Fatigue and pain are especially important to manage early on.
- Give yourself time to adjust to physical changes before resuming or beginning a sexual relationship.
- Remember that sexuality involves much more than intercourse. Explore other ways of building intimacy, arousal, and sexual gratification.
- Plan sexual activity during times when you are less likely to have fatigue or pain. It may take some time before you are ready for more spontaneity.
- Talk openly with someone on your health care team about your sexual side effects and ways to manage or treat these. For example, for women there are vaginal lubricants and several hormone therapy options that might help with dryness. For men, there are medications that might help with getting and maintaining an erection.
- Talk with your partner about your fears and concerns, and let your partner know how he or she can help you. In the same way, encourage your partner to share his or her concerns. Honest, open communication is essential. Learn more about talking with your spouse or partner [7].
- Consider letting your partner see and touch scars or noticeable body changes before sexual activity, if it would make you feel more comfortable.
- Address sexual and body image concerns in individual or couples therapy. Learn more about counseling [8].

If you are single, think about how you want to discuss your cancer experience and its implications (such as your ability to have kids) with a potential partner. Some people like to be open right away and others are more comfortable waiting you have formed a relationship of mutual trust and caring. However, try not to let fear of rejection stop you from dating. Many people have issues or fears of their own that also make them feel vulnerable with a new person. Learn more about being single with cancer [9].

More Information

Sexual and Reproductive Health [10]

Managing Sexual Problems [11]

Relationships and Cancer [12]

Cancer in Young Adults [13]

Additional Resources

National Cancer Institute: Sexuality and Reproductive Issues [14]

LIVESTRONG: Female Sexual Functioning After Cancer [15]

LIVESTRONG: Male Sexual Functioning After Cancer [16]

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[2] http://www.cancer.net/patient/Multimedia/Cancer.Net+Videos/For+Young+Adults+with+Cancer/Dating+and+Sexuality
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/25194
[4] http://www.cancer.net/node/24490
[5] http://www.cancer.net/node/24585
[6] http://www.cancer.net/node/24589
[7] http://www.cancer.net/node/25207
[8] http://www.cancer.net/node/24699
[9] http://www.cancer.net/node/25297
[10] http://www.cancer.net/node/25240
[11] http://www.cancer.net/node/25054
[12] http://www.cancer.net/node/25112
[13] http://www.cancer.net/node/25117
[14] http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/pdq/supportivecare/sexuality/Patient
[15] http://www.livestrong.org/Get-Help/Learn-About-Cancer/Cancer-Support-Topics/Physical-Effects-of-Cancer/Female-Sexual-Functioning-After-Cancer
[16] http://www.livestrong.org/Get-Help/Learn-About-Cancer/Cancer-Support-Topics/Physical-Effects-of-Cancer/Male-Sexual-Functioning-After-Cancer