Cancer and Being Single

This section has been reviewed and approved by the Cancer.Net Editorial Board [1], August / 2012

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

Key Messages:

- Dating and developing new relationships can be challenging for single young adults with cancer.
- Deciding when to tell someone about your cancer diagnoses is a personal choice. The right time will differ for each person.
- Being honest about each other?s concerns can make talking about sexuality easier than you thought.

Dating

Dating is an important part of life for many young adults, especially those hoping to find a partner, marry, and start a family. A fear of rejection or not being a suitable partner may cause a person, with or without cancer, to avoid dating. Although rejection does happen, cancer or not, it's important to not let the fear of rejection keep you from dating.

Meeting new people

After being diagnosed with cancer, it can feel like the disease defines you. Finding social and recreational outlets can help your self-confidence and provides an opportunity to meet new people. In addition, it can help to:

- Spend time with friends and family doing social activities you enjoy.
- Try a new hobby, join a club, or take a class. These activities can help you become more comfortable with how people respond to you, especially if you have physical signs of cancer, such as hair loss, scars, or an amputation.
- Make a list of positive qualities about yourself that make you a good partner. Sometimes, cancer survivors feel that they appreciate relationships more than other young adults do. Others find that they are more mature or have gained coping skills that can help a new relationship.

Telling a new partner about your experience with cancer

Deciding when to tell a new partner about your experience with cancer is a personal choice. Some cancer survivors are reluctant to discuss something so personal with someone new and are afraid of scaring away a potential partner. For others, their cancer experience is so important that not telling someone early in a relationship feels dishonest. While the right time to tell differs for each person, it may help to wait until you and your new partner have developed a mutual level of trust and caring. It is also best to tell a new partner before a relationship becomes serious.

As your relationship grows, it becomes more important to find a way to talk about difficult topics, such as the possibility of infertility [3] (the inability to become pregnant or have children), the risk of the cancer coming back, and the potential for long-term side effects from the cancer and treatment. Some partners may also need to be reassured that cancer is not contagious. You cannot give cancer to anyone else, no matter how intimate you become with your partner.

Cancer and sexuality

Some cancers and cancer treatments directly affect sexuality through physical changes to the body. Other physical changes, such as hair loss, scars, or loss of a body part, may affect a person's body image [4]. Some young adults are concerned about how cancer has affected their sexual attractiveness or sexual performance.

Communication is important in overcoming anxiety about beginning a new sexual relationship. Discussing sexuality with a new partner can be difficult, but it can help alleviate some of your anxiety and lead to a greater sense of emotional intimacy and trust. There is no "perfect time" to talk about sexuality, but it?s best to discuss the topic before becoming sexually intimate. Pick a time to talk with your partner when you are both relaxed. Practice ahead of time so you know what you want to say. Be honest about your concerns and encourage your partner to share any concerns he or she may have. Most people find that talking about sexuality becomes easier with practice and that it?s a lot easier than they thought it would be.

Finding support

Some young adults find that speaking with a counselor [5] and/or joining a support group [6] is helpful in sorting through questions about sexuality,

intimacy, fertility, and relationships. Many people find that support groups for other singles or young adult cancer survivors are a good source of advice and encouragement.

More Information

Sexual and Reproductive Health [7]

Cancer in Young Adults [8]

Additional Resources

National Cancer Institute: Sexuality and Reproductive Issues [9]

*LIVE**STRONG*** : Dating and New Relationships [10]

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/25196
[4] http://www.cancer.net/node/25194
[5] http://www.cancer.net/node/24699
[6] http://www.cancer.net/node/25383
[7] http://www.cancer.net/node/25240
[8] http://www.cancer.net/node/25117
[9] http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/pdq/supportivecare/sexuality
[10] http://www.livestrong.org/Get-Help/Learn-About-Cancer/Cancer-Support-Topics/Emotional-Effects-of-Cancer/Dating-and-New-Relationships