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Talking With Your Spouse or Partner [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the Cancer.Net Editorial Board [2], 05/2012

Key Messages:

- Most couples will experience changes in their relationship after a cancer diagnosis, although the specific effects vary from couple to couple.
- It is important for you and your spouse or partner to communicate effectively. If you find it difficult to express your feelings, consider seeking help from a professional counselor.

Because your spouse or partner is a primary source of support, a cancer diagnosis may affect this relationship more than it affects other relationships. Parents are also a big source of support for young adults, and it may be hard to find a balance between these two sources of support. Learn more about cancer and your parents [3].

What your spouse or partner may be experiencing

Young adults typically do not expect a spouse or partner to face a life-threatening illness at such a young age, so the diagnosis of cancer may be overwhelming. Both individuals may experience some of the following feelings:

- Sadness
- Anxiety [4]
- Depression [4]
- Anger [5]
- A sense of hopelessness

Expect changes

Although the effects of cancer vary from couple to couple, most couples will experience changes in a variety of aspects of their relationship, including roles and responsibilities, sexuality [6], intimacy, parenting [7], and plans for the future.

For many couples, facing the challenges of cancer together strengthens their relationship. Uncertainty about the future can reinforce a couple's love and commitment. It may allow them to reevaluate their priorities and reinforce the importance of their partnership. In other situations, a

cancer diagnosis can strain the relationship. Learn more about relationships and cancer [8].

The importance of communication

The complex emotional and lifestyle changes that follow a cancer diagnosis make communication important for the health of your relationship. Good communication involves talking openly and honestly about your thoughts and feelings with someone who listens and supports you. It includes both expressing your own perspective and listening to your partner's point of view, accepting it without criticism or blame.

Here are some tips to help you and your partner talk about cancer:

- Select times to talk when you are both free from distractions. Some couples find that scheduling a daily time to sit down and talk works well.
- Practice what you plan to say before you bring it up with your partner if you have something especially difficult to discuss.
- Talk honestly about your feelings, both positive and negative. Emotions such as anger, fear, frustration, and resentment are normal reactions to cancer. Couples often don't discuss these emotions because they fear upsetting the other partner or because they feel guilty. However, hiding emotions creates distance between partners and prevents couples from supporting and comforting each other.
- Talk about differences between your feelings and your partner's feelings, and respect the other person's point of view. For example, you may be more scared, while your partner may be more hopeful.
- Talk about differences in how you each cope with stress, and respect your partner's coping style.
- Tell your partner which types of support and encouragement you need. One day you may need practical help, and another day you may need emotional support.
- Continue to talk about topics other than cancer. Talking about shared interests helps couples feel closer, and it often reduces stress by temporarily shifting attention from the challenges they are facing.

Finding help

If you are having relationship or communication problems, consider seeking help from a marriage counselor [9] or joining a support group [10]. Support groups are available for couples, people with cancer, and spouses or partners of people with cancer.

More Information

Relationships and Cancer [8]

Where to Find Support [11]

Cancer in Young Adults [12]

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/young-adults/family-friends-and-relationships/talking-your-spouse-

or-partner
[2] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[3] http://www.cancer.net/patient/Coping/Age-
Specific+Information/Cancer+in+Young+Adults/Family%2C+Friends%2C+and+Relationships/Cancer+and+Your+Parents
[4] http://www.cancer.net/patient/Coping/Emotional+and+Physical+Matters/Depression+and+Anxiety
[5]
http://www.cancer.net/patient/All+About+Cancer/Cancer.Net+Feature+Articles/Quality+of+Life/Coping+With+Anger
[6] http://www.cancer.net/patient/All+About+Cancer/Treating+Cancer/Sexual+and+Reproductive+Health
[7]
http://www.cancer.net/patient/All+About+Cancer/Cancer.Net+Feature+Articles/Family%2C+Friends%2C+and+Caregivers/Paren
[8] http://www.cancer.net/patient/Coping/Relationships+and+Cancer
[9]
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[10]
http://www.cancer.net/patient/Publications+and+Resources/Support+and+Resource+Links/General+Cancer+Organizations+and
[11]
http://www.cancer.net/patient/Coping/Emotional+and+Physical+Matters/Sexual+and+Reproductive+Health/Where+to+Find+Sup
[12] http://www.cancer.net/patient/Coping/Age-Specific+Information/Cancer+in+Young+Adults