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## **Dating and Intimacy** [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 02/2014

### **Key Messages:**

- As a single person, it's normal to have fears and concerns about dating, new relationships, and sexual intimacy; however, these concerns should not keep you from dating if you choose to do so.
- Although it may feel awkward and difficult at times, sharing your concerns and experiences with a dating partner often helps relieve stress and anxiety.
- Support is available to help with the physical and emotional changes that affect your feelings about dating and starting a new relationship.

Single adults with cancer often experience physical and emotional changes during and after cancer treatment that affect their dating and sexual relationships. Starting new relationships is often stressful for anyone, but it is especially difficult for single adults with cancer or a history of cancer. Many single cancer survivors avoid dating because they fear being rejected. The possibility of rejection is real, but it's important to not let a fear of rejection stop you from dating altogether.

### **Sharing your experience with cancer**

Deciding when and how to share your cancer experience with a new date is different for each person. You may feel that talking about your diagnosis and treatment is too personal to share with someone new, or that it may scare away a potential partner. You may want to wait until they have developed a mutual level of trust and caring to talk about living with cancer.

On the other hand, you may feel that not telling a date about your cancer feels dishonest or insincere, and you may find that you prefer to tell a new partner before a relationship becomes serious.

It is also important to remember that there are many ways to share your experience with cancer. Some people may choose to talk with a partner, others may find it easier to show a new partner scars or other body changes associated with cancer and its treatment, and others may be more comfortable using humor to express their fears and concerns.

Whenever and however you are ready to start sharing, some of the issues you may want consider include:

- The possibility of recurrence
- Physical limitations, because of cancer or its treatment
- Your feelings about dating or starting a relationship

Before sharing your feelings or experience, you may find it easier to write down what you are going to say or practice with a friend if you plan to discuss them, or be prepared for possible questions from your partner. Learn more about [talking with a partner](#) [3].

## **Starting new relationships**

Here are some suggestions that may help if you are having difficulty starting new relationships or are anxious about dating:

- Spend time with friends and family. Tell them you are ready to meet potential dating partners.
- Try a new activity, join a club, or take a class. These activities will help you become more comfortable with how people respond to you, especially if you have physical signs of cancer, such as hair loss or scars.
- Make a list of positive qualities about yourself that make you a good partner.
- If you are anxious about rejection, practice what you might say and how you would handle the situation.
- Talk to other cancer survivors who have started dating and are in new relationships for support and advice.
- Don't give up on dating or your hope for a new relationship if someone doesn't share your feelings.

## **Concerns when starting a new sexual relationship**

Your concerns about sexuality and intimacy in a new relationship are very dependent on your personal experience with cancer and where you are in your life. For example, fertility may be a major concern for younger people but not for older adults.

In general, cancer treatment may cause [sexual side effects](#) [4] that include:

- Erectile dysfunction
- Difficulty achieving orgasm
- Vaginal dryness
- Pain during intercourse
- [Your ability to have children](#) [5]

In addition, other [physical changes](#) [6] (such as losing a testicle, needing a colostomy or an ostomy, losing weight or hair, or having scars or skin changes) may not affect sexual function directly, but can affect the way you feels about your body and physical and sexual attractiveness.

Even if your body does not appear to have changed from cancer or cancer treatment, you may feel differently about your body. These changes can affect your [self-image](#) [7], self-confidence,

and sense of attractiveness.

It is important to talk with your health care team about any sexual or physical side effects you experience from cancer or cancer treatment. They will suggest ways to help you manage or lessen the symptoms.

### **Overcoming anxiety about starting a new sexual relationship**

One of the most important steps in overcoming anxiety about beginning a sexual relationship is being open with your new partner. Communication is important for healthy sexuality in any relationship, but some people feel that sexuality is private and they may have difficulty sharing their concerns about sex, even with a long-term partner. However, sharing your sexual concerns with a new partner, even if it is difficult for you, may help alleviate some of your worries and lead to a greater sense of emotional intimacy and trust.

### **Talking to a new partner about sexual intimacy**

There is no "perfect time" to talk about sex, but it is best to talk about it with a new partner before becoming sexually intimate. If you are initially uncomfortable talking about sexuality, you may discover that it becomes easier to discuss with practice and it may help to have several shorter conversations. It is also important to remember that talking about sex is not the only way to express your sexual needs and desires. Here are some suggestions to help you and your partner talk about sexuality.

- Decide what you want to say to your partner ahead of time and write down your thoughts or talk with a friend.
- Pick a time to talk with your partner when you are both relaxed and not rushed, and pick a place that is private and neutral.
- If you have difficulty using sexual terms, practice saying the words aloud until you feel more comfortable. Most sex therapists recommend using real words, rather than slang terms or euphemisms.
- Be honest about potential problems, such as erectile dysfunction or vaginal dryness, and discuss things you both can do to help minimize these problems.
- Explain or show your partner any physical changes to your body. You may feel less anxious if your partner knows about changes to these parts of your body before your first sexual experience together.
- Guide your partner to the positions and activities that provide the most pleasure and those that cause discomfort. Agree to let your partner know if anything becomes painful so he or she doesn't need to worry about hurting you.
- Keep in mind that sexual intimacy involves more than intercourse?experiment with other ways of giving and receiving sexual pleasure.
- Remember that a partner who truly cares about you will accept you as you are.

### **Finding support**

If you continue to experience ongoing problems with emotional and sexual intimacy, you may want to consider a support group or help from a [counselor](#) [8]. Counselors and sex therapists can help you address problems with communication, and emotional and sexual intimacy. [Joining a support group](#)

[9] or contacting a cancer support organization will connect you with others who have shared your experience and can offer advice and support.

### **More Information**

[Common Sexual Concerns](#) [10]

[Cancer.Net Video: Moving Forward ? Dating and Sexuality](#) [11]

[Online Communities for Support](#) [12]

### **Additional Resource**

[National Cancer Institute: Life After Treatment, Body Changes and Intimacy](#) [13]

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#### **Links:**

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/coping-and-emotions/sexual-and-reproductive-health/dating-and-intimacy>

[2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25207>

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25054>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25268>

[6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25238>

[7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25264>

[8] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24907>

[9] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25383>

[10] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25195>

[11] <http://www.cancer.net/node/28086>

[12] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24634>

[13] <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/coping/life-after-treatment/page5>