

Oncologist-approved cancer information from the American Society of Clinical Oncology

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Being Single With Cancer

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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, talking with a dating partner about your concerns 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 can be 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 a let a fear of rejection stop you from dating altogether. Here are some tips on talking to a date about cancer, starting new relationships, and talking about sexual intimacy.

Talking to a date about cancer

Deciding when to tell a new date about your cancer experience is challenging. Some cancer survivors may feel that talking about their diagnosis and treatment is too personal to share with someone new, their experience may scare away a potential partner, and that not telling a date about their cancer feels dishonest or insincere.

The right time to talk to a partner about cancer differs for each person. However, it may help to wait until you and your new partner have developed a mutual level of trust and caring. Some people prefer to tell a new partner before a relationship becomes serious. When you are ready, some of the issues you may want to discuss are:

- · The possibility of recurrence
- Your ability to have children [1]
- · Physical limitations, because of cancer or its treatment

Before talking about these topics, you may find it easier to write down what you are going to say or practice with a friend. Learn more aboutalking with a partner [2].

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 and find social activities you enjoy. These are possible ways to meet someone new.
- 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.
- · 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

As many survivors already know, cancer and its treatment may cause sexual side effects [3]. These may include:

- · Erectile dysfunction
- · Difficulty achieving orgasm
- · Vaginal dryness
- · Pain during intercourse

In addition, other physical changes (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 do affect the way a person feels about his or her body and physical and sexual attractiveness.

Even a person whose body was not outwardly changed by cancer may feel differently about his or her body. These changes all affectself-image 41,

self-confidence, and a person's 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 minimize 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 talking with your new partner. Communication is important for healthy sexuality in any relationship, but sexuality is private and most people find it hard to talk about sex, even with a long-term partner. Talking about sex with a new partner is difficult, but it may help alleviate some of your anxiety 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. Most people find that it becomes easier to talk about sexuality with practice and it may help to have several shorter conversations. As you and your partner become more comfortable discussing sexuality, you will be better able to talk openly and honestly about ongoing changes in 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 practice in front of a mirror or with a friend.
- 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.
- · Pick a time to talk to your partner when you are both relaxed and not rushed, and pick a place that is private and neutral.
- · Talk to your partner about 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.
- Be honest about potential problems, such as erectile dysfunction or vaginal dryness, and discuss things you both can do to help minimize these problems.
- Keep in mind that sexual intimacy involves more than intercourseâ€"experiment with other ways of giving and receiving sexual pleasure.
- · Talk with your partner about 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.
- 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 sexual intimacy, you may want to consider a support group or help from acounselor [5].

Counselors and sex therapists can help you address problems with communication, and emotional and sexual intimacy. Joining support group [6] or contacting a cancer support organization will connect you with others who have shared your experience and can offer advice and support.

More Information

Online Communities for Support [7]

The Benefits of Counseling [8]

Additional Resources

LIVESTRONG: Dating and New Relationships [9]

Links:

[1] http://www.cancer.net/patient/Coping/Emotional+and+Physical+Matters/Sexual+and+Reproductive+Health/Fertility+and+Cancer+Treatment

[2] http://www.cancer.net/patient/Coping/Relationships+and+Cancer/Talking+About+Cancer/Talking+With+Your+Spouse+or+Partner

[3] http://www.cancer.net/patient/All+About+Cancer/Treating+Cancer/Managing+Side+Effects/Sexual+Problems

[4] http://www.cancer.net/patient/Coping/Emotional+and+Physical+Matters/Self-Image+and+Cancer

[5] http://www.cancer.net/patient/All-About+Cancer/Cancer.Net+Feature+Articles/Quality+of+Life/How+to+Find+a+Counselor
[6] http://www.cancer.net/patient/Publications+and+Resources/Support+and+Resource+Links/General+Cancer-Organizations+and+Resources/Support+Groups

[7] http://www.cancer.net/patient/All+About+Cancer/Cancer.Net+Feature+Articles/Quality+of+Life/Online+Communities+for+Support

[8] http://www.cancer.net/patient/All+About+Cancer/Cancer.Net+Feature+Articles/Quality+of+Life/The+Benefits+of+Counseling [9] http://www.livestrong.org/Get-Help/Learn-About-Cancer/Cancer-Support-Topics/Emotional-Effects-of-Cancer/Dating-and-New-Relationships