

Sexual Health in Men after Cancer Treatment

Sexual health is an important part of life, and many men notice changes in their sexual function after cancer treatment. These changes can include problems with erections, ejaculation, orgasm, desire, or body image. It is common to feel worried or frustrated about these changes, but there are ways to help.

What are the most common sexual health challenges after cancer treatment?

In males, problems might include:

- **Erectile dysfunction:** This is being unable to get or keep an erection most times you have sex.
- **Low sex drive or low libido:** These mean having little or no interest in sex.
- **Premature ejaculation:** This is ejaculating too soon after sex begins, before you are ready to ejaculate.
- **Being unable to ejaculate** (even though you can get and keep an erection)

What causes sexual issues after cancer treatment?

- **Surgery** (especially pelvic surgeries such as prostatectomy, cystectomy, or colorectal surgery) frequently causes erectile dysfunction due to injury to blood vessels or nerves, as well as ejaculatory dysfunction and, in some cases, penile shortening or sexual incontinence. Pelvic surgery is associated with the highest rates of sexual dysfunction in men, with erectile dysfunction rates up to 90% in prostate cancer survivors and high rates of ejaculatory dysfunction in bladder and colorectal cancer survivors.
- **Radiation therapy** to the pelvis can damage blood vessels and nerves, leading to erectile dysfunction and orgasmic changes. These effects may be delayed and progressive over time. Radiation can also cause fibrosis (scarring) and reduced penile blood flow which can interfere with sexual function.
- **Chemotherapy** can result in decreased libido (low sex drive), fatigue, and impaired spermatogenesis (low sperm). While direct injury is less common, chemotherapy can cause hormonal changes, testicular dysfunction, and psychological distress, all of which negatively impact sexual function.
- **Hormone therapy** (e.g., androgen deprivation therapy for prostate cancer) is strongly associated with loss of libido, erectile dysfunction, and decreased energy due to profound testosterone suppression. Hormonal therapy is a major contributor to sexual problems in male cancer survivors.

What can help?

Treatments for male sexual health problems following cancer treatment should be individualized based on the specific problem (e.g., erectile dysfunction, ejaculatory disorders, low libido) and other medical issues.

- For **erectile dysfunction**, First-line therapy with oral phosphodiesterase type 5 (PDE5) inhibitors (e.g., sildenafil, tadalafil, Viagra, Cialis), provided there are no contraindications such as

concurrent nitrate therapy. An adequate trial is defined as at least five attempts at the maximum tolerated dose. If this is ineffective, second-line options include vacuum erection devices (VEDs), intracavernosal injections (injections into the penis), and intraurethral suppositories. For cases that do not respond to these measures, penile prosthesis implantation is another option and should be discussed with appropriate counseling regarding risks and benefits. Early initiation of penile rehabilitation (e.g., daily VED use, early PDE5i) may help preserve penile length and function after pelvic surgery or radiation.

- For **ejaculatory and orgasmic disorders**, checking testosterone levels and considering testosterone replacement therapy if there are no contraindications. Vibratory therapy, pelvic physical therapy, and psychological evaluation may also be beneficial.
- For **low libido or intimacy issues**, psychosocial counseling is recommended, ideally involving the partner, and referral to a sexual health specialist when appropriate. Smoking cessation, weight loss, management of depression/anxiety can also help.

Is there anything I can do on my own to improve my issues with sex?

Maybe. If you are having relationship problems, you can try to improve your relationship with your partner. For example, you can:

- Talk to your partner about how to make sex better.
- Try to have more fun together by having a regular "date night."
- Read books or websites about sex.
- Go to counseling, either alone or with your partner.

If you are overweight, losing weight might help improve your sex problems. Getting regular exercise can help, too, even if you are not overweight.

Remember to talk to your health care provider if you are having sexual health difficulties.