

## Sexuality and Cancer

Sex and sexuality are important parts of everyday life. Sexuality can enhance self-esteem, improve overall comfort, and make it easier to cope with cancer. You may find that intimacy means something different now. Hugging, touching, holding, and cuddling may become more important and sexual intercourse less important. There is no “right” way to express your sexuality. It is up to you and your partner to decide together what is pleasurable and satisfying to both of you.

Cancer and cancer treatments can impact your sexuality and sexual functioning in different ways. Side effects can be both emotional and physical and can appear during or after treatment. These topics are sometimes difficult to discuss, even with an intimate partner. It may also be difficult to discuss with your healthcare team (physicians, nurses, and licensed clinical social workers) because you may feel embarrassed, uncomfortable or feel that the sexual side effects are not as important as the cancer itself. We encourage you to talk to someone from your healthcare team who can discuss these sensitive issues with you.

### **Coping with challenges that may interfere with your enjoyment of sex**

Below are some common side effects that you may experience during and after treatment:

- **Decreased Libido**

This is the lack of desire to be sexually intimate. This may be caused by the cancer treatment itself, other medicines, or may have a more emotional component. For more information, see your licensed clinical social worker or visit the Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey’s Resource and Learning Center (2<sup>nd</sup> Floor Library).

- **Body Image**

Cancer treatments often change the way you view yourself. For example, hair loss, weight gain/loss, and surgical scars may impact your ability to feel desirable. Talking with your partner about how you are feeling about these changes may be helpful and reassuring. If you are experiencing significant distress, you may find it helpful to seek help from one of our licensed clinical social workers.

- **Pain/Discomfort During Intercourse**

There are several factors that may contribute to pain or discomfort during sex. To help you feel more comfortable, you may want to try relaxation techniques, warm baths, massage, pillows, water-based lubrications, and pain medicines.

- **Depression, Sadness and Anxiety**

These feelings can have a big impact on desire to be intimate and the ability to experience pleasure. Seek counseling from one of our licensed clinical social workers who can help you work through some of these feelings

- **Nausea**

A light meal, crackers, and/or anti-nausea medicines may help relieve nausea.

- **Fatigue**

Before sexual activity, you may find it helpful to nap, avoid heavy meals, and alcohol. Try sexual positions that require minimal effort such as side, laying or sitting on a chair.

- **Shortness of Breath**

You may need to use your prescribed oxygen or inhalers prior to sexual activity. Couples may need to use alternatives for sexual expression such as mutual caressing, stimulation and/or cuddling.

**What to do for safer sex?**

- Throughout cancer treatment, pregnancy **MUST** be avoided due to the medicines in your body. Birth control methods should be used at all times.
- During the entire duration of cancer treatment, use barrier contraceptives such as condoms or dental dams for intercourse and/or oral sex.
- If your white blood cell count (which helps fight infection) or platelet count (which prevents bleeding) is low, check with your healthcare team to determine if it is ok to have sex.
- Use water-based lubrication (KY®, Surgilube®). Do **not** use Vaseline® or other oil-based lubricants. Another option may be a vaginal moisturizer such as Replens, which can be used three times a week.
- Clean sex toys thoroughly with antibacterial soap and water after each use.

**What resources are available?**

There are many resources to help address sexual concerns. The following resources have information which you may find helpful:

- **Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey's Resource and Learning Center – [www.cinj.org/rlc](http://www.cinj.org/rlc)**  
The library has books and information specifically about these topics available for patients. It is located on the second floor, room 2500, at the Cancer Institute.
- **The American Cancer Society (ACS) – [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)**  
The ACS website offers helpful information about fertility, sexuality, sexual side-effects of cancer treatments, and ways to manage some of the symptoms you may be experiencing.
- **United Ostomy Associations of America, Inc. (UOA) – [www.ostomy.org](http://www.ostomy.org)**  
UOA offers information for patients who have undergone ostomy surgery, including several documents on sexuality and intimacy.

If you have any questions, we encourage you to talk to your healthcare team.

<b>If you are in need of immediate assistance, please call 732-235-2465 and select the option that best meets your needs.</b>
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