

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.

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 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.

Challenges that may interfere with your enjoyment of sex

- **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.
- **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.
- **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, massages, pillows, water-based lubricants, 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.
- **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 lying 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.

If you experience any of these symptoms, contact your healthcare team.

What to do for safer sex?

It is safe to have sex during cancer treatment. The guidelines below are suggested for the protection of you and your partner.

- Throughout cancer treatment, pregnancy **MUST** be avoided due to the medicines in your body. Birth control methods should be used at all times.
- It is recommended to use a barrier device (condom or dental dam) during treatment and for a week after each treatment during oral, vaginal, or anal sex. This prevents your partner from being exposed to any medicines that may be in your bodily fluids. If your partner is pregnant during treatment, you should also use barrier devices. Discuss suggestions of barrier devices with your healthcare team.
- 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 a water-based lubricant (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. Visit the Rutgers Cancer Institute of New Jersey's Resource and Learning Center to get books and information specifically about these topics available for patients. It is located on the second floor, room 2500, at the Cancer Institute. Contact information listed below:

- **Phone number: 732-235-9639**
- **Email: cinj-rlc@cinj.rutgers.edu**
- **Website: www.cinj.org/rlc**

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

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