Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

A Guide for Adolescents and Young Adults (AYAs): Dating After Your Cancer Diagnosis

This information has tips that may help you start dating or go back to dating after a cancer diagnosis. You may also find some of the tips helpful if you're already dating or in a relationship with someone.

Being diagnosed with cancer can affect how you see yourself and feel about yourself. It can also affect how you feel about getting to know someone new, especially someone you're dating.

There are many things to think about when you decide to start dating or go back to dating. We hope this resource can help you. You can also find a list of support services in the "Get Support" section of this resource.

Check In With Yourself

Dating after your cancer diagnosis may seem overwhelming, whether you're new to dating or have dated before. Checking in with yourself about how you feel can help. You can ask yourself:

- Why do I want to date?
- Am I ready to put myself out there and meet someone new?
- What things am I looking for in a partner?

You may see your cancer diagnosis as a part of your identity now. But it does not have to define you. There are many other parts to who you are, such as your personality, values, and beliefs. Focusing on these other parts may help you feel

comfortable putting yourself out there to meet someone new.

Address Your Concerns About Body Image

Lots of people have physical changes during and after cancer treatment. Your treatment may have changed how your body looks and feels. You may have scars, hair loss, or weight changes. You may feel pain or more tired or weak than usual.

All these changes can affect your confidence and body image. Body image is how you see yourself. It's how comfortable you feel in your body and how you feel about the way you look.

Many people also have emotional changes during and after cancer treatment. Your treatment may have affected your emotions, bringing on new and upsetting feelings. It may have made you feel stressed, anxious (worried or afraid), or depressed (very sad or hopeless). This may have also affected your interest in sex or lessened your enjoyment and pleasure in sexual activities.

No matter where you are in your cancer experience, feeling comfortable with your body and confident in yourself is important. It will help you connect with other people on a deeper level. It will also help you be more present when meeting new people.

As you start to address body image concerns, it's helpful to:

- **Give yourself time to adjust to the changes happening to your body.** Take time to process your thoughts and feelings about how these changes affect your confidence and body image.
- **Figure out which activities make you feel good and do them as often as you can.** Some examples are:
    - A hobby, such as cooking or playing a musical instrument.
    - A physical activity, such as yoga or walking.
    - A creative activity, such as writing or painting.

- **Talk with other AYA patients.** They may be going through the same thing as you. You can learn how they deal with their body image concerns and remember that you're not alone.
- **Make a support system for yourself.** Talk with friends and family members. Sharing your feelings with people who are close to you can help ease your concerns.
- **Talk with your care team.** Tell them if you're worried about changes happening to your body. They can listen to your concerns, answer your questions, and give you guidance and support.
- **Talk with a mental health expert.** MSK's counselors and social workers can offer mental and emotional support to you and your family. They can help you understand how treatment affects your sense of self and help you deal with body image concerns.

Find Ways to Meet New People

Meeting new people is a necessary part of dating. But it may be hard to know where to start. Here are some things you can try:

- Going to social events (such as sporting events or birthday parties).
- Reconnecting with friends, classmates, or co-workers. You may be able to meet new people through them.
- Joining a club or taking up a new hobby.
- Creating an online dating profile. You can share your profile with a friend and ask them what they think about it. If you're not sure what to write, you can ask them to help you.

When you start meeting new people, remember to be kind and patient with yourself. It may take some time for you to feel a connection with someone. That's OK. While dating can sometimes be hard and stressful, it can also be fun and exciting.

Talk with your care team before going out and meeting people. Some cancers

and cancer treatments can weaken your immune system. This makes you more likely to get an infection.

Talk About Your Diagnosis

It can be hard to talk about your cancer diagnosis when you're dating. It can be even harder to decide when to tell someone about it. The right time is different for everyone. Some people may want to talk about their cancer right away. Others may want to wait until after a few dates, or even after a few months of dating.

If you're using dating apps, think about how much or how little you want to share in your profile. For some people, sharing information about their cancer diagnosis and treatment upfront can be a relief or feel empowering. Others may not feel comfortable sharing this in a public profile where many people may see it.

You may plan to talk about your diagnosis on a date. If you do, practicing what you're going to say with someone you trust may be helpful. Think about questions your date might ask you and how you will answer. Remember, there is no right or wrong way to have this conversation.

Some people may share details about their cancer experience, showing their scars or other body changes. Others may use humor to describe their experience, telling jokes or funny stories. Do what feels most comfortable for you.

Share Your Thoughts and Feelings About Physical Intimacy

Part of the fun and excitement of dating is showing affection to someone and being physically close with them. This may include cuddling, kissing, and different types of sexual activity. Having this type of closeness with someone is called physical intimacy.

How you feel about being physically intimate with someone new may have

changed following your cancer diagnosis. That's OK. If physical intimacy is a concern, the best thing you can do is talk openly with your potential partner. This can help you get to know each other and build trust.

Think about how these different changes may affect the way you relate to potential partners. You can ask yourself:

- Am I comfortable showing my body to another person?
- How do I feel emotionally? Am I able to manage my feelings?
- Am I interested in physical intimacy? What types of intimacy am I comfortable with?

Just asking yourself these questions is helpful. There are no good or bad answers.

Get Support

Trying to figure out how to start dating or go back to dating after your cancer diagnosis is hard. You do not have to figure it all out on your own. To help you, we offer support groups for people around your age, such as our Young Adult Support Group.

There are many benefits to joining a support group. A support group can help you:

- Feel less lonely and isolated.
- Talk openly and honestly about your feelings.
- Improve your coping skills and lessen any stress, anxiety, or depression you're feeling.
- Gain a deeper understanding about your own cancer experience and others' experiences.
- Become empowered after your diagnosis and stay motivated during your treatment.

For more information about our Young Adult Support Group, visit www.mskcc.org/event/young-adult-support-group.

For more information about our other programs and support services, read *Support Resources for Adolescents and Young Adults (AYAs)* (www.mskcc.org/pe/aya_support_resources).

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

A Guide for Adolescents and Young Adults (AYAs): Dating After Your Cancer Diagnosis - Last updated on May 10, 2022
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