Sexual Health and Intimacy

This information explains how to maintain sexual health and intimacy during cancer treatment.

It’s common for people to feel changes in their body during and after cancer treatment. There may be things you can see right away, like surgical scars, drainage tubes, and catheters (thin, flexible tubes). You may experience a loss of hair, a change in your weight, pain, or fatigue (feeling more tired or weak than usual).

These physical changes may affect how you feel about yourself or how you relate to your partner. They can affect your interest in sexual activity. They may also lessen your enjoyment and pleasure.

Here are some suggestions and resources to help you adjust and cope during this time.

Coping With Your Feelings

During and after your cancer treatment, you may feel different. The first step in coping is to talk about how you feel. Family and friends can help. Your nurse, doctor, and social worker can reassure, support, and guide you. Here are some ways you can cope during and after cancer treatment:

- Recognize the things that you enjoy about yourself or make you feel special. These may be related to your family, friends, personal interests, or work life.
- Spend time doing activities and being with people that you enjoy.
- If your faith is important, maintain your spiritual or religious practices.
- Choose clothes that make you feel good.
- Have your favorite clothes altered to fit better.
- Take part in the “Look Good Feel Better” program. See the section called...
Maintain Physical Intimacy With Your Partner

- Talk with your partner about your physical relationship. Talk about what you think would help you feel close and give you both pleasure. Share your concerns so that you can find solutions together.
- Increase intimate and sensual touching. Hug, caress, cuddle, touch, and hold hands to feel closer to each other.
- Try being intimate at times when you have more energy.
- Being relaxed can help with sexual enjoyment. Select a time and place when you can relax and have privacy.
- If sex is difficult or uncomfortable:
  - Try different sexual positions. Some may be less tiring or more comfortable.
  - Vaginal moisturizers and lubricants can be helpful for women. For more information, read the resource Improving Your Vulvovaginal Health (www.mskcc.org/pe/improving_vulvovaginal_health). You can find it online, or you can ask your nurse.
  - Medications to help with erections (getting hard for sex) can be helpful for men.

Special points related to sexual activity

- You should ask your healthcare provider if there are any safety measures you should use for different types of sexual activity (such as oral, anal, or vaginal sex).
- If there is any chance you or your partner can become pregnant, use birth control (contraception) during your cancer treatment. If you have any questions about birth control, or for help deciding the type of birth control that’s right for you, talk with your healthcare provider.
- Ask your healthcare provider how long you should use birth control after your treatment is over.
• Some cancer treatments may affect your fertility (the ability to become pregnant with a biological child). If you have questions about this, ask your healthcare provider.

• Ask your healthcare provider if your blood cell counts are high enough for you to have safe sex.
  - Your white blood cell count should be high enough to prevent infection.
  - Your red blood cell count should be high enough to prevent bleeding.

• Use a condom to protect yourself from sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV, especially if you have more than 1 partner.

For more information, read the resource *Sexual Activity During Cancer Treatment: Information for Men* ([www.mskcc.org/pe/sexual_activity_treatment_men](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/sexual_activity_treatment_men)) or *Sexual Activity During Cancer Treatment: Information for Women* ([www.mskcc.org/pe/sexual_activity_treatment_women](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/sexual_activity_treatment_women)). You can find them online, or you can ask your nurse.

**Talk With Your Healthcare Provider if:**

• You have vaginal dryness or tightness that makes sexual activity painful. Simple solutions are available to help. You can also ask for a referral to our Female Sexual Medicine and Women’s Health Program. Call 646-888-5076 to make an appointment.

• You have difficulty getting or keeping an erection or have a low testosterone hormone level. Your healthcare provider can recommend medication that may help. You can also ask for a referral to our Male Sexual and Reproductive Medicine Program. Call 646-888-6024 to make an appointment.

• You have accidental leakage of urine or bowel movements (stool). This is called incontinence. Your healthcare provider can give you a referral to the Sillerman Center for Rehabilitation or call 646-888-1900 to make an appointment.

• You have any questions or concerns.
MSK Support Services

Female Sexual Medicine and Women’s Health Program
646-888-5076
Our Female Sexual Medicine and Women’s Health Program helps women who are dealing with cancer-related sexual health challenges, including premature menopause and fertility issues. For more information, or to make an appointment, please call 646-888-5076.

Male Sexual and Reproductive Medicine Program
646-888-6024
Our Male Sexual and Reproductive Medicine Program helps men who are dealing with cancer-related sexual health challenges, including erectile dysfunction. For more information, or to make an appointment, please call 646-888-6024.

Sillerman Center for Rehabilitation
646-888-1900
515 Madison Avenue (Entrance on East 53rd Street, between Park and Madison Avenues)
New York, NY 10022

Some types of cancer and treatments damage the pelvic muscles. This can cause back and pelvic pain and urinary or fecal incontinence. If you’re experiencing these problems, ask your doctor or nurse for a referral.

Counseling Center
646-888-0200
641 Lexington Avenue, 7th Floor (on East 54th Street between Third and Lexington Avenues)
New York, NY 10022

Many people find that counseling helps them. We provide counseling for individuals and couples to help you process any issues and work with you to solve problems. Your partner can attend these sessions with you, if you would like.
Look Good Feel Better Program
800-395-LOOK (800-395-5665)
Learn techniques to help you feel better about your appearance by taking a workshop or visiting the program online at www.lookgoodfeelbetter.org

External Resources

American Cancer Society (ACS)
www.cancer.org
800-ACS-2345 (800-227-2345)
The ACS has free booklets on cancer and sexual health called *Sex and the Man With Cancer* and *Sex and the Woman With Cancer*. You can search for them on www.cancer.org or call to request printed copies.

National Cancer Institute (NCI)
www.cancer.gov
Contact the NCI to learn more about sexual health and cancer.

If you have any questions, contact a member of your healthcare team directly. If you're a patient at MSK and you need to reach a provider after 5:00 PM, during the weekend, or on a holiday, call 212-639-2000.

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