Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

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 have changes to your body, such as losing your hair, changes 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 in sexual activities. Here are some suggestions and resources to help you maintain sexual health and intimacy during your treatment.

Managing your feelings

You may feel different during and after your cancer treatment. To help you deal with this, it's important to talk about how you feel. Family and friends can help. Your care team can reassure, support, and guide you. Here are some ways you can manage your feelings during and after cancer treatment:

- Figure out what you enjoy about yourself or what things 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 an online or in-person Look Good Feel Better program. See the section “External resources” to learn more.

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 with them 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.
- Try to relax. Being relaxed can help with sexual enjoyment. Choose a time and place when you can relax and have privacy.
- If sex is hard or uncomfortable:
  - Try different sexual positions. Some may be less tiring or more comfortable.
  - Vaginal moisturizers and lubricants can be helpful. Read *Improving Your Vulvovaginal Health* (www.mskcc.org/pe/improving-vulvovaginal-health) to learn more.
  - Your care team can prescribe medicine to help with erections (getting hard for sex). Talk with your care team to learn more.

Special points related to sexual activity

The following are special factors you should think about before starting sexual activity during or after your cancer treatment:

- 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).
- 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.
- If there's 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 cancer 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.

To learn more, read *Sex and Your Cancer Treatment* (www.mskcc.org/pe/sex-cancer-treatment).

When to talk with your healthcare provider

Talk with your healthcare provider if:

- You have vaginal dryness or tightness that makes sexual activity painful. Simple solutions, such as vaginal lubricants or moisturizes, can 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 trouble getting or keeping an erection (erectile dysfunction) or have a low testosterone hormone level. Your healthcare provider can recommend medicine 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 emotional issues affecting your sexual health, such as having a low desire to have sex. You can also ask for a referral to our Female Sexual Medicine and Women's Health Program or our Male Sexual and Reproductive Medicine Program.

- You have accidental leakage of urine (pee) or bowel movements (poop). This is called incontinence. Your healthcare provider can give you a referral for rehabilitation therapy, or you can call 646-888-1900 to make an appointment.

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 issues. To learn more, or to make an appointment, 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 issues. To learn more, or to make an appointment, call 646-888-6024.

Counseling Center
646-888-0200
www.msk.org/counseling
160 E. 53rd St.
New York, NY 10022
Many people find that counseling helps them manage their feelings. 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.

External resources

American Cancer Society (ACS)
www.cancer.org
800-ACS-2345 (800-227-2345)
The American Cancer Society also has information about sexual health issues during cancer treatment. You can find it online at

www.cancer.org/cancer/side-effects/sexual-side-effects or call 800-227-2345 to ask for printed information.

Look Good Feel Better Program

www.lookgoodfeelbetter.org
800-395-LOOK (800-395-5665)
This program offers workshops to learn things you can do to help you feel better about your appearance. To learn more or to sign up for a workshop, call the number above or visit the program's website.

National Cancer Institute (NCI)

www.cancer.gov
Visit the NCI's website to learn more about sexual health and cancer.

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.

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