

## Sexual Intimacy During Cancer Treatment

Concerns about sex can be hard for most people. When your partner is going through cancer treatment, it can be even more difficult to know how to cope with issues of intimacy. Here are some common challenges and suggestions for supporting your partner and sharing sexual intimacy during cancer treatment.

My partner doesn't seem to have enough energy for sexual activity. How can I help?

- Plan time for intimacy when your partner has rested, possibly after a nap.
- Avoid sexual intercourse after a heavy meal.
- Insure privacy and plan uninterrupted time.
- Avoid extremes in temperature. Set room temperature for your partner's comfort.
- Assist with household chores to conserve your partner's energy.
- Assume the active role during sexual intercourse. You can make the majority of movements and let your partner remain passive.
- Experiment with positions that require less energy; for example, side lying positions. You can also maintain the superior position during sexual intercourse.
- Experiment with methods of sexual pleasuring that require less movement and exertion such as caressing, hugging, massage, and manual stimulation.

How can I help my partner cope with the changes that are happening to his/her body?

- Allow your partner to communicate feelings and concerns over the changes occurring in his/her body. Share how you are feeling.
- Assist your partner with everyday activities, but do allow as much independence as they feel possible.
- Try not to be judgmental. Be supportive.
- Maintaining a healthy attitude when your partner is ill demands a lot of energy. Your partner may need more rest, including naps.
- If getting 'in the mood' is an issue, the two of you may wish to read some erotic books together or view an erotic film. Erotic background music may also be helpful.
- Chemotherapy may change normal vaginal lubrication; women may use a water-soluble lubricant, without a prescription in any drug store. A water-soluble lubricant allows easier movement with less friction and it washes away easily.
- A good sense of humor shared by both partners can help make the rough spots smoother.
- Therapeutic touch can be learned by you and your partner and practiced as part of your intimate times together.

- Plan time for sharing that is separate from your time for sexual intimacy.
- A support group for you and your partner may be helpful. Sometimes sharing concerns with others in the same situation will help you work through some of your own. The social worker, your health care provider, the resource center or the local chapter of the American Cancer Society may help you find an ongoing support group in your area.

Can we have sexual intercourse while my partner is receiving chemotherapy?

- When your partner's blood counts are low, sexual intercourse and oral-genital stimulation should be avoided to decrease the chance of your partner developing an infection. When blood counts return to normal, these activities can be resumed. If your partner consents, discuss this with his/her health care provider.
- If there is a chance of pregnancy, birth control should be used. Chemotherapy can cause changes in the female eggs and sperm that could lead to birth defects in the unborn child. If your partner is male, he may wish to sperm bank prior to the start of therapy since some types of treatment may cause sterility.
- Plan your sexual activity when the effects of the chemotherapy are minimal. In order to control nausea, your partner may wish to take anti-nausea medication, especially during the first week after each cycle therapy

I'm afraid that sexual intercourse will cause more pain for my partner.

- Explore ways to learn relaxation with your partner and practice prior to sexual activity or as part of your shared intimate experience. Ask for our teaching sheet on relaxation.
- Give your partner a massage. Ask for our massage teaching sheet to learn more.
- Share a bath or shower. Warm tub baths may improve muscle relaxation and lessen discomfort.
- Encourage your partner to use fantasy or learn self-hypnosis. Focus attention away from areas of discomfort.

Talk about the pleasure of the experience.

- Have your partner use pillows to support painful areas when ever possible.
- Experiment with different positions. Use positions that offer comfort.
- Assume the active role during intercourse and make most of the movements. Allow your partner to remain passive.
- Experiment with alternative forms of sexual pleasuring such as caressing, gently hugging, massage, and touching stimulation. You can also be aware of other pleasurable areas. The face, lips, hair, ears, neck, breasts/nipples, abdomen, genital area, buttocks, thighs and feet are all areas that can feel good when caressed.

Where can I get more information?

- Learn about Dana-Farber's [sexual health program for cancer patients and survivors](#).
- You can speak with your health care provider. It is possible a current medication may affect your sexual enjoyment (i.e. beta blockers, antidepressants.) Do not stop taking any drug without talking to your doctor first.
- Visit your local library. There are many books available about sexual intimacy. Some will be illustrated and will give you a better idea of techniques and exercises that you can try.
- Sex Information and Education Council of the U.S.
- SIECUS  
130 West 42nd St. Suite 350  
New York, NY 10036-7502  
Telephone: [212-819-9770](tel:212-819-9770)  
Web: [www.siecus.org](http://www.siecus.org)
- American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists (AASECT)  
P.O. Box 1960 Ashland, VA 23005-1960  
Telephone: [804-752-0026](tel:804-752-0026)  
Web: [www.aasect.org](http://www.aasect.org)
- Cancer Information Service – [\(800\) 4-CANCER](tel:8004CANCER). This is a nationwide toll-free telephone program sponsored by the National Cancer Institute. Trained specialists provide information to the public, cancer patients, their families, and health care professionals.