

# Sexuality & Intimacy During & After Cancer Treatment

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It is common to have difficulty engaging in sexual activity during cancer treatment. Many of these difficulties are due to the direct physical effects of treatment, but may also be related to factors such as feeling stressed and worried or feeling less attractive due to physical changes. Common complaints include: loss of sexual desire, vaginal dryness and difficulty getting and sustaining an erection. Many of these issues are temporary and resolve over the months following the end of treatment. However, intimacy and sexuality are important aspects of life and problems in this area are often frustrating and disappointing.

For many people, discussions of sexuality and intimacy are difficult and even embarrassing. However, we encourage you to approach whichever member of your medical team you feel comfortable with to discuss your concerns. A psychologist can also bring up questions with your physician if you find doing so uncomfortable.

## Tips Related to Sexual Difficulty

- Get enough rest. Some people find that sexual desire improves after a nap or good night's sleep.
- Plan for sexual activity when the effects of treatment (e.g., nausea, fatigue) may be less (e.g., not right after a cycle of chemotherapy).
- Start with non-penetrative activities (e.g., kissing, touching, massage) and slowly build from there. If intercourse is difficult and/or you feel nervous, practice being intimate *without* the goal of having intercourse.
- Practice making sexual activities “fun and light” by planning an activity such as a “make out session.”
- Take your time and focus on the various enjoyable sensations you experience.
- Focus more on arousal and enjoyment and less on orgasm.
- Set realistic expectations for yourself and your partner; not every sexual experience will go extremely smoothly or be incredibly enjoyable.
- Use pillows to support sore areas of your body in order to increase overall comfort.
- Consider using an aid to increase arousal (e.g., vibrator) or watching/reading erotic material. \*If you are unsure if using an aid is medically safe during treatment, please ask your medical provider.
- Experiment with different positions that may increase stimulation and/or conserve energy if you are feeling fatigued.
  
- For women, if you are having vaginal dryness, consider using a water-based lubricant such as K-Y® Jelly or Astroglide®. Do not use Vaseline® or other petroleum-based lubricants.
  - Notify your medical provider if you are having pain during intercourse, bleeding or signs of a vaginal or bladder infection (burning with urination, itching or odorous vaginal discharge) or if you have sores/lesions on your vaginal or genital area.
  
- For men, difficulty getting or maintaining an erection is a common and usually temporary side effect of cancer treatment. Discussing this with your medical provider may be useful as there are certain medications and/or devices that can help you sustain an erection. Difficulty keeping an erection can also be related to anxiety or depression and discussing this with a psychologist may be useful.
  - Notify your medical provider if you have any sores/lesions on your genital area.

It is possible that your health care provider has told you to limit your sexual activity while undergoing treatment, or if it is currently difficult to have intercourse, remember that you can take time to be intimate with your partner.

## The Oncofertility Clinic at UCH Advanced Reproductive Medicine – 303-724-8089

UCH offers a broad oncofertility program that can assist both male and female patients before, during, and after cancer treatment with contraception, fertility preservation, hormone replacement therapy, sexual functioning, as well as traditional reproductive medicine services. The Oncofertility Program Coordinator can be reached at 303-724-3378 or [oncofert@ucdenver.edu](mailto:oncofert@ucdenver.edu).

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## Improving Communication with Your Partner

- Communicating with your partner can help you both better understand your feelings and desires and is helpful when navigating the intimacy challenges during and after treatment.
- Tell your partner how you feel about changes in your body and being sexually intimate, especially if you have mixed feelings about becoming close or having intercourse after treatment.
- Encourage your partner to communicate with you, especially if you notice changes in your partner's behavior or responsiveness.
- Approaching difficulties as challenges to be faced together may help couples to continue to strengthen their relationship even when working through physical and emotional changes.

While sexual intercourse is one aspect of intimacy, it is helpful to remember that being intimate does not require having sex. Love and affection can be expressed in many ways, such as enjoying time together, kissing, hugging, sharing a meal, and giving each other back rubs. Intimacy develops over time and can happen in different types of relationships, not just romantic ones. Intimacy can be sexual, emotional or spiritual, and is related to having a deep, meaningful relationship, not sexual satisfaction.

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## Tips/Ideas to Increase Intimacy in Your Relationship

- Practice limiting the time spent talking about problems and set time aside for fun activities.
- Focus on what your partner is doing right, instead of focusing on the things he/she are not doing right.
- Remember that small, brief gestures such as writing a "love note" or giving your partner a hug can make him/her feel special and valued without taking up a lot of time or energy if you are stressed or tired.
- Show interest in your partner's hobbies/interests or allow him/her space and time to participate in them.
- Create a "date night" where you cook together or go out to a meal or other enjoyable activity.
- Compliment your partner often & share what you love and appreciate about him/her.
- Focus on ways to be physically close without having sex (e.g., kissing, holding hands, giving each other foot or back massages).
- Find opportunities to laugh and joke. Having a sense of humor can make difficult times easier to manage and also help you feel more connected to your partner.
- Spend time talking about fun or special memories of time spent together (e.g., "Remember that great vacation we had...")
- If you have a setback, try not to blame each other, rather focus on what you can do differently.