

TAKING CARE OF YOUR SEXUAL HEALTH WHEN YOU HAVE CERVICAL CANCER

It's common for people going through cervical cancer treatment to face sexual health challenges—both physical and emotional. Treatment can affect many aspects of sexual functioning, and change the way you feel about your body. This may make it harder to enjoy sexual pleasure and intimacy.

Cancer treatment can also cause change to your relationship as you and your partner are likely both dealing with strong emotions such as anger, anxiety, and uncertainty. In addition, you are both handling the disruption to your normal routines whether that means frequent medical appointments or side effects that make it hard for you to do things from household chores to outside fun. If you don't have a partner, cancer treatment and the side effects will likely have a significant impact on your dating life at least in the short-term.

In a National Cervical Cancer Coalition (NCCC) survey of just over one hundred cervical cancer patients and survivors, nearly all agreed that cancer has had an impact on their intimate relationships—and the problems are both physical and emotional. It's understandable that for anyone dealing with cancer, the disease may have to take center stage at least for a time. Still, it's not good to ignore sexual and intimacy issues as they are important to your overall health, well-being, and relationships.



FERTILITY CONCERNS

Though sex is not just about procreation, some people facing cervical cancer may be concerned about their future fertility. There are some treatments for cervical cancer that can preserve your future ability to conceive and carry a pregnancy to terms if the cancer is caught early and tumors are small. Many treatments, however, such as a hysterectomy, chemotherapy, or radiation, may have a negative impact on fertility.

If you think you might want to have children in the future, talk to your cancer care team about the impact of the treatments they are recommending. Also ask about the possibility of freezing eggs or embryos. This may allow you to get pregnant in the future through IVF or to work with a surrogate. Most healthcare providers recommend against getting pregnant for at least six months after radiation or chemotherapy. If pregnancy is still possible, talk to your healthcare provider about contraception.

POSSIBLE SEXUAL SIDE EFFECTS

Treatment for cervical and other gynecological cancers—whether surgery, radiation, or chemotherapy—can cause physical changes that make sex less enjoyable. Having your ovaries removed can bring on instant menopause, which often comes with symptoms like hot flashes, night sweats, mood changes, vaginal dryness, and low interest in sex. Even without surgery, chemotherapy and radiation can cause some of the same symptoms. Radiation can also cause vaginal stenosis, a build-up of scar tissue that makes the vagina narrower, shorter, and less pliable (it doesn't stretch as easily).

TIPS FOR DEALING WITH SEXUAL HEALTH ISSUES

- **Use Lube.** Lubrication can help with many of these issues. When the vagina is wet during sex, penetration causes less friction and feels a lot better. There are many kinds of lubricants on the market. Silicone lubes are often the best for penetrative sex, but just remember that these can't be used with most sex toys. You can also use water-based lubricants though these sometime dry up too quickly.
- **Choose Other Activities.** If penetrative sex is uncomfortable, you can also choose other activities such as mutual masturbation or oral sex that can still satisfy you and your partner both physically and emotionally. Staying intimate and connected to a partner during this time is important, but intimacy does not require penetration or orgasm (you could just spend a lot of time cuddling).

CONCERNS ABOUT YOUR PARTNER'S HEALTH

Many people going through chemo or radiation are concerned that their partner may be exposed to the strong chemicals involved in your treatment. Your health care provider knows the exact treatment you are getting and can answer questions you have about any risk to your partner. That said, many experts suggest using condoms when you have sex during treatment to be safe.

You may also have concerns about whether your condition itself is contagious. While cervical cancer is not transmittable, most cases are caused by HPV which is a highly contagious STI. It's so contagious, that most sexually active people will get HPV at some point in their life. For most people the infection will go away on its own without them ever knowing they've had it.

If you've been with your partner for a while, it is likely that they've already been exposed to any HPV you have so using condoms for this purpose is not necessary. If your partner is concerned, however, it is possible for them to get the HPV vaccine as a way to avoid infection. (The HPV vaccine is currently only recommended for those age 45 or younger but your partner can talk to their health care provider about the possibility of getting it at an older age given the circumstances.)

BE HONEST

Cancer treatment can make you feel not like yourself. This can come from the physical symptoms like nausea or fatigue, psychological issues like anxiety or loss of self-esteem, and the emotional weight of not knowing what will come next. All of this takes a toll on you and your partner.

Being open and honest with your partner can help take some of the pressure off. If you're not up for sex, you can say that. If you're interested, but scared it might hurt, say that. Ask your partner what they are feeling as well and give them permission to be honest. Staying connecting is important, but when it comes to sex, neither of you ever has to do anything you don't want to do.

RESOURCES

For more information and additional resources (including videos and podcasts), please see the National Cervical Cancer Coalition's web page on sexuality and cancer at www.nccc-online.org.