



## **Having Sexual Relationships During and After Cancer Treatment**

Cancer and its treatment can have a temporary or permanent impact on your sexuality. This can be especially difficult if you are a young person navigating puberty, sexual feelings and relationships for the first time. You may not be ready to have sex or even think about it, and that's perfectly OK.

What is important is you understand the impact cancer and its treatment may have on your sexuality. Being aware of how your body might change and knowing where to get help if you need it will allow you to cope better

This fact sheet outlines some common concerns young people with cancer may have about their sexuality and sexual relationships. We hope it will guide you to further information and support for your individual needs.

### **Hang on...What is sexuality anyway?**

Sexuality encompasses much more than just your sexual feelings towards others. It is about who you are, how you feel about yourself (self-esteem), your body, how you express yourself sexually, your sexual preferences and who you choose to have sex with. You express your sexuality in the way you move, dress, speak and live. It is influenced by your gender, age, health, beliefs and culture. Sexuality is a normal, life-long and positive aspect of your health and wellbeing.

### **Important note!**

Having cancer or being on treatment doesn't always mean you will have sexuality problems. However, if you have concerns it helps to talk to people you trust. For example, health professionals, a parent or another adult you feel close to. It can be embarrassing to talk about your sexual concerns but most young people with cancer will have similar sexual worries. Your feelings are likely to be completely normal. Knowing there is help and support available can allow you to feel less anxious.



## **Sexual relationships while on cancer treatment**

Sexual relationships can be a challenging and complex part of any young person's life. Throw in the complication of having cancer and it can become overwhelming! It is difficult to predict exactly how cancer and its treatment will affect each individual and their sexuality. But you may experience some or all of the following:

- Tiredness/fatigue
- Changes to your body due to surgery which can affect your sexuality.
- Feeling anxious, upset or angry
- Feeling low in mood (sadness/depression)
- Fear of rejection
- Loss of interest in sexuality and sexual relationships
- Loss of sensation
- Changes in how you feel about yourself and your body.
- Changes in body image (e.g. hair loss, weight loss or scars)
- Possible treatment side effects (e.g. vaginal dryness, erection difficulties)

Tips for coping with sexuality problems during cancer treatment:

- Communicate – discussing your feelings, concerns and preferences with your partner(s) or someone you trust can help improve your sexual relationships. It may help avoid frustrations that arise due to misunderstandings.
- Try other kinds of intimacy – cuddling, talking and kissing can help you feel close with your partner.
- Always use protection (condoms, dental dam, gloves and lube) to avoid unplanned pregnancies. It may be appropriate for young women to use other methods of contraception (the pill) if they don't interfere with
- Ask for help – talking about sexuality can be difficult. But talking to a counsellor/health professional about your feelings and relationships may help guide you in the right direction.
- Remember – most sexual problems due to cancer and cancer treatments are temporary. With patience and time, many problems can be overcome.



treatment protocols.

- Ensure you're not exposing your partner to any chemotherapy (if you're having chemotherapy).

## **Sexual relationships after cancer treatment**

Cancer treatment can change how you feel about your body. This can influence how attractive you feel, your confidence and your desire to have sexual relationships. Many people who have gone through cancer treatment report loss of interest in sex and problems with sexual functioning. This is the same for people of all ages, but can be especially difficult if you are still young and figuring out sexual relationships for the first time.



## **Sexual issues for girls**

### **Vaginal dryness**

You might find you can't 'get wet' during arousal. This sometimes makes sexual activity uncomfortable. It may also increase the risk of getting a sexually transmitted disease (STD) such as Chlamydia. Using water-based lube will easily help with dryness. You can buy it at any supermarket or chemist.

### **Reduced vaginal size**

Some treatments might reduce the size of your vagina, making sexual intercourse difficult. Talk to a sexual health expert/counsellor. A vaginal dilator can help but you only use this when you are willing and ready.

## **Sexual issues for guys**

### **Impotence**

Guys, if you can't get or maintain an erection during or after cancer treatment, just know you are not alone. It is a common problem but you don't have to suffer in silence. There are things you can do to help. Many guys find erection problems are due to the psychological impact of cancer. For example, decreased confidence and poor body image. Talking to a counsellor/health professional about your feelings can help you address this sensitive issue.

### **Ejaculation difficulties**

Some guys get what's called a "dry orgasm" where no semen comes out during orgasm. Most guys will still feel the pleasure of an orgasm, some more than before, others less so; some guys might ejaculate prematurely, but this is more often due to worrying about sexual performance than the side effects of treatment. Concentrating on the enjoyment of sexual activity and being 'in the moment' can help to overcome this issue.



## Effects on sexual desire and response

### Pleasure

Some types of cancer treatment may impact on your ability to experience sexual pleasure. This may pass with time, depending on the type of cancer and treatment you have had. Meanwhile, there are ways of feeling good by yourself or with a partner.

You can try massage, touching, kissing and cuddling or masturbating. The mind plays an important role in arousal. Think about past pleasurable experiences or visualise something you find sexy!

### Pain

Depending on the type of cancer and treatment you have had, you might find you have discomfort or pain during sexual activity (even masturbation). Scar tissue from surgery or irritation caused by chemo or radio therapies may cause problems. Tell your health care providers if you have pain in your genital area. There are ways to help you manage this.

### Desire

You may lose interest in sexual relationships. This is very normal, and usually due to tiredness or worry about everything going on in your life. Hugging, kissing and deep conversation can create intimacy and comfort during this time.



## **Fertility (getting pregnant after cancer treatment)**

Getting pregnant or having a child might be the last thing on your mind during your cancer treatment. You may not even know if you will want children later in life. However, cancer treatments may affect your future ability to create a baby. It is extremely important to talk to your doctor about potential options for preserving your fertility (eggs, sperm or tissue) for possible future use if you ever decide you want children. Sometimes these options are not always possible but it is worth having the discussion.

## **Hormone therapy**

Hormones affect how your body works as well as how you function sexually. Some hormones promote the growth of certain cancers and you may need treatment to decrease the amount of these hormones in your body. This treatment will help reduce the size of a tumour and stop it spreading. Some hormone therapies have side effects that impact on your sexuality. For example hot flushes, weight gain/loss, reduced interest in sex and soreness around the genitals. Talk with your doctor about how best to cope with these side effects.

## **Body Image**

Cancer treatments commonly cause changes to your body which can impact how you feel about yourself. Feeling good about how you look and who you are important in helping you feel comfortable with your peers and a partner, if you have one.

Weight changes, hair loss, and skin changes (e.g. scars, swelling) can all affect how you feel about yourself. Hair loss (especially head hair) can make girls feel less feminine and attractive, while for guys it can affect their sense of masculinity and confidence. Unfortunately there is no way to avoid these body changes but you can get support.



Hair will grow back, scars will fade and your self-esteem will usually return in time. Your body may not return to the exact one you had before cancer, but most cancer survivors say they can still live a full and satisfying life.

Talking to other young people who have had a similar experience can help reassure you a lot. There are several ways to do this such as ace-to-face or online support groups, through supportive friends, family or partners and by reaching out to your health care providers. Surround yourself with people who love and accept you and will be there for you no matter what.

### **More information for young people with cancer and their sexuality**

#### **Other fact sheets from the Future Fertility website**

[www.futurefertility.com.au](http://www.futurefertility.com.au) or [www.futurefertility.com.nz](http://www.futurefertility.com.nz)

Livestrong website: Fertility information

<http://www.livestrong.org/we-can-help/fertility-services/fertility-prepubescent-girls-cancer/>

Planet Cancer, a community of young adults with cancer in their 20s and 30s <http://myplanet.planetcancer.org/>

### **More information about sexual and reproductive health for young people**

Family Planning NSW

[http://www.fpnsw.org.au/index\\_under25s.html](http://www.fpnsw.org.au/index_under25s.html)

Play Safe: a website for young people about sexual health and keeping safe <https://playsafe.health.nsw.gov.au/>

ACON Youth <http://www.acon.org.au/youth/sexual-health>

Reach Out <http://au.reachout.com/wellbeing/sex-and-relationships>

Maybe Later Baby <http://www.canteen.org.au/how-we-help/information/a-guide-to-fertility-for-young-people-with-cancer/>

Cancer Support for young people

Canteen <http://www.canteen.org.au/>

Youth Cancer <http://www.youthcancer.com.au/>

Cancer Council NSW <http://www.cancercouncil.com.au/>