



This information sheet has been written to provide you with information about sex and cancer. We hope it answers some of the questions you may have and helps you to rebuild your sexual confidence.

How cancer and its treatment may affect your sexuality

There are four main ways that cancer or its treatment can affect your sexuality. It can affect:

- being able to give and receive sexual pleasure • how you see yourself
- feelings, such as fear, sadness, anger, and joy
- roles and relationships.

Cancer and its treatment may cause changes that are only temporary. If they are long-lasting or permanent, you can find new ways to enjoy sex.

If you are single

If you are single, your sex life is still an important part of who you are.

You may find that masturbation helps to satisfy your sexual needs. Take time to relax and explore your body and find what works for you. Masturbation may be different after treatment. Try using a water-based lubricant to increase sensation.

If you want to start a new relationship it can be very difficult to decide what to tell a new partner about your cancer, and also when to tell them. There is no simple answer that will work well for everyone. To help you decide, it may be useful to consider how safe you feel in this new relationship. You may find it useful to talk to a counsellor about starting a new relationship or any worries you have.

Cancer treatments and their effects

Surgery

Any form of surgery can affect our sex lives. It can affect your body image and how you think about your body. For example, some people feel or say that their body has “let them down” because they used to feel fit and healthy. Some feel like a different person and they’ve lost confidence. Others find they experience sexual sensations even though they have changes to their erections and orgasms. Everyone reacts differently.

Radiation treatment

Radiation treatment treats cancer by using highenergy rays (radiation) that destroy the cancer cells while doing as little harm as possible to normal cells. Radiation treatment commonly causes fatigue (tiredness that does not go away with rest), which may last for several weeks, months, or even years.

The tiredness from having radiation treatment can make you feel less like having sex. Your skin may also feel tender and you may not want that area touched.

Radiation to the head and neck area could mean that kissing or oral sex is painful as your mouth is dry and sore.

Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy is the use of anti-cancer (cytotoxic) medication to destroy cancer cells. Some of the side effects of chemotherapy such as tiredness and lack of energy can change how you feel about yourself. With time, your sex drive will usually return once chemotherapy is over.

If chemotherapy causes hair loss, weight changes or if you have a Portacath (an implantable port or central venous line in your chest), you may feel “unsexy” at the time.



Hormonal therapy

Some cancers are influenced by hormones naturally produced by the body, so treatment is given to change hormone levels. These changes in hormone levels can make you feel less like having sex.

Infertility

Infertility means that a man cannot get a woman pregnant and a woman cannot become pregnant.

Chemotherapy, radiation treatment and some types of surgery can cause infertility. Ask your doctor if your treatment is likely to cause fertility problems. Your cancer doctor will be able to talk to you about ways to manage the impact of cancer treatment on your fertility.

For some people there is an uncertainty, which is ongoing and difficult to cope with. If you want to have children, and find that you are infertile, this can cause a whole range of emotions. It may be helpful to talk to your health professional or Cancer Society information staff and ask about counselling.

Once your treatment has ended you may wish to explore your fertility options further. Specialised help is available, including counselling and guidance about alternatives to having your own children.

Contraception

It's not recommended you become pregnant or father a child while having treatment and for some time after treatment finishes. Discuss this issue with your cancer doctor or nurse.

Help for pain during sex

Pain during sex can occur after pelvic surgery or radiation to the area. The pain can take away sexual feelings and reduce desire.

There are many reasons why pain can be felt. It may be helpful to see a pelvic health physiotherapist and learn relaxation techniques to stop the muscles tensing. It is important to let your partner know what is painful during intercourse.

Talk to your doctor about lubricants and moisturisers

Coping with vaginal problems

Cancer treatments such as chemotherapy, hormonal therapy, or radiation treatment to the pelvic area and pelvic surgery may cause a variety of vaginal changes. These changes may lead to pain during intercourse, vaginal dryness, narrowing or shortening, ulcers, and infection.

There are ways to manage these problems. Lubricants and vaginal moisturisers can help with dryness. It may also be

helpful to experiment with sex toys or different positions when having sex. Talk to your doctor, nurse or sexual counsellor for more advice on ways to manage the changes you are experiencing.

Coping with erection problems after cancer treatment

Some men say they have erection difficulties after cancer treatment. While there are practical ways to help overcome impotence (such as the use of oral medicine and physical devices), you do not need to have a hard penis to give your partner pleasure and you can still experience orgasm without an erection.

If erection difficulties are a problem for you, you may also find it helpful to increase your range of sexual activity to include oral sex, mutual touching, masturbation, or use of a vibrator to help your arousal or that of your partner. With time, some men find that they can recover full erections.

Prostate cancer can affect your sex life and your ability to get an erection. Going through treatment and coping with the effects of changes on your hormones can have big effects on how you feel about yourself and your interest in sex.

There are practical ways to help overcome erection problems such as physical devices, oral medications and injections, and penile implants. The sites below can be helpful to read:

Understanding prostate cancer:

<https://www.cancer.org.nz/assets/Downloads/Booklet-a-guide-for-people-with-prostate-cancer.pdf>

<https://healthymale.org.au/>

www.atouchysubject.com

www.prostatecanceruk.org look under sex in the search

www.sextherapy.co.nz

www.prostate.org.au

Some common questions about sex and cancer

Can I catch cancer from my partner?

No. You cannot catch cancer from having sex with your partner.

Could sex make my cancer spread to other parts of my body?

No. Sex will not cause cancer to spread to other parts of your body.

I seem to have lost interest in sex. What can I do about this?

It's OK if you don't want to have sex. There are many reasons why this might be the case. For many people, having cancer changes how they feel about themselves and how they feel about sex. Open communication with your partner is key to navigating these changes.

Cancer treatments can often cause fatigue (tiredness that does not go away with rest) and reduce your desire for sex. Be flexible about the time of day and night you have sex. Find the time to be together when you feel less tired.

If you are feeling depressed, anxious or afraid about your cancer, its treatment or your relationship, you are less likely to be interested in sex. People who have had changes in their bodies through illness or surgery often describe a fear of rejection. This is not uncommon. For more information, see our booklet *Emotions and Cancer*.

Are there any good positions for having sex during or after cancer treatment?

This will depend a lot on which part of your body is affected by cancer. If it is in your pelvis (genital area) then it may take some gentle and patient experimenting to discover which positions now suit you both. This can also be true after a mastectomy (removal of the breast) when some people say that they don't want their partner's weight resting on them. In some situations, for example, where penetrative sex is painful, you may want to find other ways to have sex or be affectionate.

How can I overcome problems of tiredness?

Cancer treatments can often cause fatigue (tiredness that does not go away with rest) and reduce your desire for sex. Be flexible about the time of day and night you have sex. Find the time to be together when you feel less tired.

The Cancer Society has an information sheet titled "Managing cancer fatigue" that has ideas for managing fatigue. You can read this information sheet on our website www.cancer.org.nz or you can get a copy by phoning your local Cancer Society or the Cancer information staff on **0800 CANCER (226 237)**.

I'm embarrassed about my scars but still want to have sex — any ideas?

Talk to your partner about how you feel about your scars. Most people find their partners are much less concerned by their scars than they thought, and once you've talked about it openly you can feel more relaxed about the changes to your body. You may feel more comfortable if you have the lights turned down low during sex. Some people may find it

helpful to wear clothing such as a T-shirt during sex if they are bothered by their scars. For further information about sex and cancer read our booklet *Sex and Cancer*. You can receive a copy via our website www.cancernz.org.nz or through our Cancer Information Helpline **0800 CANCER**.

Can having sex cause cancer?

Some cancers of the cervix, vulva, anus, penis and mouth are linked to the human papilloma virus (HPV). HPV can be passed on through sexual contact. But, only a few people who have the virus will develop cancer in later life. Most adults have been exposed to the HPV virus at some stage in their lives.

Suggested websites and readings

Cancer Society of New Zealand

www.cancernz.org.nz

Cancer Council Victoria (Australia)

www.cancervic.org.au

Macmillan Cancer Support

www.macmillan.org.uk

Prostate Cancer UK

www.prostatecanceruk.org

Cancer Society of New Zealand, Sex and Cancer, 2017.

<https://www.cancer.org.nz/assets/Booklet-sex-and-cancer-2.PDF>

The suggested websites are not maintained by the Cancer Society of New Zealand. We only suggest sites we believe offer credible and responsible information, but we cannot guarantee that the information on such websites is correct, up-to-date, or evidence based medical information. We suggest you discuss any information you find with your cancer care health professionals.