

Living and Loving

A guide for men having treatment for cancers of the blood

Sex is an important part of life. This does not change when you have cancer. It's true that having cancer and going through treatment can affect your sex life. However, most men who enjoyed a healthy sex life before developing cancer can expect to regain this after cancer treatment.

Some people find it difficult to talk about such a personal topic. So the health care team has written this booklet to answer some common questions. We hope that the booklet reassures you and gives you helpful information. We also invite you to talk with us. You can have a private conversation with any member of your health care team. We are here to help.

Give yourself time to adjust

Your experience with cancer can change how you see yourself as a man. Treatment can cause changes to your body that you may think make you less attractive. Some of these, such as losing your hair, are temporary. When you are concerned about how you look, it is normal not to feel confident or attractive.

You may feel too tired or too sick to even think about sex. At the same time, you may worry that you aren't satisfying your partner's sexual needs. This too is normal.

It takes time to get used to these changes. You will need to work through your feelings and find ways to cope. What will help is different for each person. You will do what is right for you.

Physical activity can boost your energy, improve your sense of well-being and keep up your strength. You may enjoy walking or light exercise. Start slowly and go at your own pace. Plan time to rest after activity, so you won't get overtired.

It can help to talk about it

Going through cancer treatment can be a very emotional experience. You may feel sad, anxious, helpless or angry. At the same time, you may have hope and a fighting spirit. Dealing with these emotions by yourself can be exhausting and lonely. It can help to talk with someone you trust. This may be your partner, a family member, close friend or a member of your health care team.

Your partner is also affected by your illness. She or he may be reluctant to talk about her or his feelings and sexual needs, thinking that this will upset you or seem selfish. Your partner may be afraid that sex will hurt you. By talking openly and honestly, you can understand each other's feelings and support each other. Together you can find ways to cope with the changes in your relationship.

Some people facing cancer need professional support. If your feelings are overwhelming or you feel that you aren't coping well, please let us know. Our social worker may be able to help or she can arrange for you to have counseling with a therapist.

Support from others who have gone through a similar experience is available on-line, but please be cautious about taking advice from people you don't know. Before taking any action, talk with your health care providers.

Find ways to stay close

Even though your energy and desire for sex may be low, you and your partner still need to feel loved and be touched. You can find ways to share affection and pleasure, without having sexual intercourse. This may mean your intimate relationship includes more touching, holding and kissing. You may enjoy having a massage or just being together. It can help to focus on the positive.

With time, your usual sexual desire and response may return. You may resume sexual activity when you feel ready. Some people prefer to wait until they have completely recovered.

As you resume sexual activity, take it slow. Let your partner know how you feel. Tell her or him what you would like and what feels good. Depending on your health, you may need to find new ways of giving each other sexual pleasure.

There can be some medical risks. For example, it may not be safe to have any sexual activity when your blood counts are too low. Answers to some common questions about risks are on page 5. For specific information about your risks, please talk with your doctor.

Possible sexual side effects

Cancers of the blood and their treatment can, but do not always, affect your sexual organs and how they work. Whether you have sexual side effects depends on the type of treatment, your age and general health. Talk with a member of your health care team about the specific side effects you may experience.

The following is general information about possible side effects.

Some medications used in cancer treatment have sexual side effects. You may lose interest in sex, or be unable to get an erection or ejaculate. Your usual sexual function should return when you stop taking the medication.

Some chemotherapy medications can harm your sperm. If your partner were to become pregnant, the damaged sperm could cause birth defects. Use condoms during sex to prevent your partner from becoming pregnant. Your doctor can give you more information about birth control methods and let you know when to stop using birth control.

Chemotherapy can reduce the number and movement of your sperm. This can cause you to become infertile (sterile). Infertility affects your ability to have a child, but does not affect your ability to have sexual intercourse. Whether you become infertile depends on many things such as your age, the type and dose of medication(s).

If you would like children, talk with your doctor about your options, before treatment begins. It may be possible to have your sperm frozen and saved in a sperm bank.

Most men regain fertility after treatment is completed.

Some advice for your partner

As the partner of someone going through cancer treatment, you will have many concerns. It can be difficult to talk about your concerns because they seem less important than those faced by the person with cancer.

You may feel worried:

- about your partner's health
- that sex may hurt your partner
- that talking about your sexual needs may seem selfish or demanding

It is important to share your feelings with your partner. Clear communication will help you understand each other and find ways to adapt to the changes in your relationship.

If your partner is less interested in sex, try to be patient. It may take many months before he feels like resuming sexual activity. During his recovery time, you can show your affection in other ways. Spend time alone, doing things you both enjoy. This will reassure your partner and help him feel loved and supported.

You need support too. You may find it helpful to talk about your feelings and concerns with a close friend, family member or a health professional.

How to get help

If your feelings are distressing or overwhelming, or your relationship with your partner becomes tense, please consider talking to a member of your health care team. Although it may be hard to bring up this topic, we are used to discussing sexuality with patients.

We can answer your questions and help you:

- cope with changes in your body
- rebuild your self-esteem
- overcome feelings of anxiety, fear or depression
- learn how to communicate clearly

We can provide information and support to you and your partner (separately or as a couple).

Common questions

What level should my platelets be?

Your platelet count should be at least 50 (50 x 10⁹/L) before having any type of sexual activity. This is because sexual activity can cause bleeding. Even a tiny amount of bleeding could be dangerous if your platelets are too low.

What level should my ANC be?

Your Absolute Neutrophil Count (ANC) or Granulocytes (Grans) should be at least 1000 (1 x 10⁹/L) before having any type of sexual activity.

During foreplay and sex, germs that naturally live on the skin can enter your body and may cause an infection. Infections that would be minor problems for someone in good health, can be more serious for you if your ANC levels are low.

It is also possible to get a sexually transmitted infection (STI) if you have unprotected sex with an infected person. With a low ANC, your immune system is too weak to fight the infection and a STI could become very serious. Even if your ANC levels are normal, protect yourself by using a condom during sex.

How long should I wait after chemotherapy or radiation therapy?

It is best to wait at least 48 hours after chemotherapy before having sex. This is the average time it takes for the chemotherapy medications to leave your body.

Radiation does not linger in your body, so there is no risk to your partner. You do not have to wait.

Can I get an infection from blood transfusions and give it to my partner?

If you have had many blood transfusions, you may be worried about getting an infection and passing it to your partner. This is extremely unlikely to happen.

To reduce the chances of getting an infection from a blood product:

- all blood donors are screened carefully for potential health problems and exposure to certain viruses, including HIV (the virus that causes AIDS) and hepatitis
- the donated blood is carefully tested

Where to get more information

You can find health information and support on the internet. Searching for information can be challenging, as the information you find may not be accurate or relevant to your needs. Please discuss the information with a member of the health care team before taking any action.

Here are some websites that may be helpful:

Canadian Cancer Society: Sexuality

www.cancer.ca

Cancer Care Manitoba: Cancer and sexuality

www.cancercare.mb.ca/

Bone Marrow Transplant Information Network

www.bmtinfonet.org/

Cancer.Net – Resources for People Living Well with Cancer

www.cancer.net

Mayo Clinic: Sexuality after cancer treatment; what men can expect

www.mayoclinic.org

Christie Hospital, UK: Sexuality and you

www.christie.nhs.uk/

Please let us know what websites you find helpful.

If you have any questions, please talk with a member of your health care team.