

# Living and Loving

## A guide for women having treatment for cancers of the blood

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Intimate relationships are 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 sexuality. But love and intimacy are not lost. You and your partner can find ways to share affection and enjoy each other throughout this experience. It can help to understand what is happening and talk openly about your feelings and needs.

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 woman. 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 “sexy”. You may also feel too tired or too sick to even think about sex. 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, light exercise or yoga. Start slowly and go at your own pace. Plan time to rest after activity, so you won't get overtired.

Many women find the “Look Good, Feel Better” Program helpful (website on page 6). By learning how to use make-up and hair alternatives, women can take control of how they look and feel better.

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## **It helps to share your feelings**

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. He or she may be reluctant to talk about his or her 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 enjoy intimacy**

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 be as simple as speaking about your love or focusing 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 him or her 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. For example, you may need to change positions to make sex more comfortable.

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There can be some medical risks with sexual intercourse. For example, it may not be safe to have sexual intercourse 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 reach orgasm. Your usual sexual function should return when you stop taking the medication.

Chemotherapy can affect your ovaries and the hormones they make. Your periods may become irregular or stop. You may have symptoms of menopause such as:

- feeling tired
- hot flashes or sweating
- mood changes
- thinning of the bones (osteoporosis)
- vaginal itching, burning or dryness

Vaginal dryness can make sexual activity uncomfortable or painful. Using a water-based lubricant can help. The changes to the vagina can also increase your risk of getting an infection.

To prevent vaginal infections:

- use only water-based lubricants (not those with oil such as petroleum jelly)
- wear cotton underpants and pantyhose with a cotton seat
- do not wear tight underwear, pants or shorts

If you think you have a vaginal infection, tell your nurse or doctor so that it can be treated right away.

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Chemotherapy can harm an unborn baby. While you are receiving chemotherapy, use an effective method of birth control to prevent becoming pregnant. Your doctor can give you more information about birth control methods and let you know when to stop using birth control.

If you are pregnant when your cancer is discovered, it may be possible to delay chemotherapy until after your baby is born. In some situations, women may need to consider the ending the pregnancy.

Chemotherapy can cause you to become infertile (sterile). Whether you become infertile depends on many things such as your age, the type and dose of medication(s). Many women regain fertility after treatment is completed. If you would like children, talk with your doctor about your options, before treatment begins.

## **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 she feels like resuming sexual activity. During her 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 her 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.

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## 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 10<sup>9</sup>/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 10<sup>9</sup>/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. Two common infections related to sex are yeast infections and bladder (urinary tract) infections. These would be minor problems for someone in good health, but 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.

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**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](http://www.cancer.ca)

Look Good Feel Better Program

[www.lookgoodfeelbetter.org](http://www.lookgoodfeelbetter.org)

Cancer Care Manitoba: Cancer and sexuality

[www.cancercare.mb.ca/](http://www.cancercare.mb.ca/)

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Bone Marrow Transplant Information Network  
[www.bmtinfonet.org/](http://www.bmtinfonet.org/)

Cancer.Net – Resources for People Living Well with Cancer  
[www.cancer.net](http://www.cancer.net)

Mayo Clinic: Sexuality after cancer treatment  
[www.mayoclinic.com/](http://www.mayoclinic.com/)

Christie Hospital, UK: Sexuality and you  
[www.christie.nhs.uk/](http://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.**