Sexuality After Cancer

Cancer survivors may have changes in their sex life after cancer. Depending on the type of cancer you had, these problems may be short-term or long-term. Sexual problems after cancer treatment are often caused by changes to your body from surgery, chemotherapy, radiation or a side effect of certain medicines. Other causes may be due to a change in how you feel about yourself, your body and other parts of your life after cancer.

It is important to tell your doctor if you notice any changes in your ability to have and enjoy sex. Sometimes there can be a medical reason for these changes. Talk with your health care team about your sexual concerns. They can answer your questions and help you find ways to manage these problems.

Not all cancer survivors experience sexual problems, but they are common. Certain types of cancer, such as those that affect sexual organs, may increase the risk for problems. Cancer survivors have reported the following concerns:

- Some struggle with their body image after treatment and may feel less attractive. Thinking about being seen without clothes may be stressful.
- Some may worry that having sex will hurt or that they will not be able to perform as before.
- Some cancer treatments cause changes in sex organs that will change your sex life.
  - Men may no longer get or keep an erection after treatment for prostate or bladder cancer. Some treatments can also weaken a man’s orgasm or make it dry.

This handout is for informational purposes only. Talk with your doctor or health care team if you have any questions about your care.

© September 19, 2016. The Ohio State University Comprehensive Cancer Center – Arthur G. James Cancer Hospital and Richard J. Solove Research Institute.
Women may find it harder, or even painful, to have sex after treatment for gynecological cancer. Some women may have a loss of sensation in their genital area.

- When women stop getting their period (menopause), they can get hot flashes, dryness or tightness in the vagina that can affect their desire to have sex.
- Low testosterone levels in men caused by surgery, hormonal therapy, chemotherapy or radiation can affect their desire to have sex.

Your cancer treatment may change the way you think about your body. It may be hard at first, but it is important to talk with your partner about how you feel. Your partner may have some of the same worries.

Your sexual health is important. There are many ways to enhance and share pleasure and closeness with your partner. You can still be close with your partner by touching, kissing, stroking, or giving each other massages. Loving words or gestures are other ways to express your feelings. Talking with a therapist or counselor may also be helpful.