

15. Sexual Concerns

Our sexuality is part of who we are as human beings and as in any other area of human behaviour it is characterized by diversity. It is influenced by attitudes, beliefs and expectations that have been shaped by our social background and personal history. Our sexuality is unique; it affects how we experience ourselves and how we relate to others, particularly in our intimate relationships.

Cancer and its treatment can affect the way people feel about themselves, their body (e.g. its appearance) and their sexuality, including their ability to give or receive sexual pleasure. After the immediate impact of a cancer diagnosis and its treatment it is not unusual that people have some concerns about resuming sexual intimacy. This is particularly the case if you are still fatigued, and if surgery or other treatments have affected your body or sexual organs (e.g. scarring, impotence or shortening/narrowing of the vagina).

It may be helpful to remember that sexual intimacy can be expressed in many ways (e.g. touch, kissing, cuddling, masturbation) and that the most important thing is to be honest and open with your partner about how you feel. Your partner may also have worries about resuming sexual activity (including wondering how you would feel about this, or whether they might cause you pain in some way). It is therefore important that you talk together about these concerns. Good communication during sexual intimacy and having a sense of control over the speed at which things happen will also be essential.

Sometimes people find it difficult to discuss sexual matters with health professionals. However, as with all worries or fears during and following cancer treatment, it is important to raise any sexual concerns that you might have so that you can obtain the very best advice and support.

How can I manage my sexual concerns?

Adjusting to change – It usually takes some time to adjust to physical differences due to surgery or treatment so it is important to ask which symptoms are temporary and which might be long term. Remember that after cancer treatment your interest in sex may be affected by continued...

- Fatigue
- Pain
- Worry, fear or anxiety
- Other emotions such as anger or sadness

(Information on these aspects of cancer can be found elsewhere in this directory.)

However, there may be practical issues you can consider and steps you could take: if you are tired or in pain it may be worth making changes to the way you make love, for example, doing so at a different time, using a different position or after taking pain killers. Taking things at your own pace can help you feel more in control of what is happening and this may help reduce any initial anxieties.

Body Image – Depending on what sort of cancer treatment you have received, some areas of your body may have changed or you may have scarring which can affect how you feel about your body. Sometimes people no longer feel sexy or good about their body and may not want anyone, including their partner, to see it. Again, it is very important to talk through how you feel about yourself and your body with your partner. After you have talked and when you feel comfortable to do so, allow your partner to see and/or touch any areas that have changed or are causing you worry. However, if this becomes a persistent issue, you may wish to request a referral for psychological or psychosexual therapy.

Colostomy – People whose treatment involves a colostomy often feel less sexually attractive and worry about how to manage their bag during sexual activity. It is important to discuss any concerns with your stoma nurse and to talk through these concerns with your partner too, even if it feels difficult to do so.

It is also helpful to be realistic about any difficulties, to take things at your own pace (for both of you), to experiment with different positions, and to try to keep a sense of humour.

Painful intercourse – if you are experiencing pain during intercourse you need to discuss this with your doctor. However, it is important to remember that this pain may have a number of causes (e.g. physical problems such as vaginal dryness, and psychological factors such as anxiety). Anxiety can lead to tension in pelvic muscles which can in turn make penetration difficult or painful; if this is the case, relaxation, the use of vaginal dilators and pelvic floor exercises is often helpful.

Vaginal Dryness can make penetration uncomfortable and painful so a vaginal lubricant may be helpful. It may be useful to discuss this with your clinical nurse specialist who will be able to tell you about vaginal lubricants that have been found helpful for women following cancer treatment, because not all lubricants are suitable or comfortable to use.

Premature Menopause – some cancer treatments may result in women undergoing early menopause and this can be psychologically and physically distressing. If you are experiencing menopausal symptoms (e.g. hot flushes, changes in mood, night sweats, lack of sleep, vaginal dryness) you can discuss this with your doctor or clinical nurse specialist.

Fertility - Fertility can be affected by some cancer treatment so this will need to be discussed with your doctors who will be able to advise you about possible options. Loss of fertility can be emotionally very painful, even if you had not previously wanted children. As with all losses, this may lead to sense of grief that will take time to come to terms with. If your grief persists you may find it helpful to seek counselling or to ask to be referred for psychological therapy.

Pregnancy and Contraception - It is possible to become pregnant during cancer treatment. Therefore, because some treatments can harm a foetus or cause birth defects, you should discuss appropriate contraception with your doctors.

Local Resources:

Resource	Contact details
<p>Psycho-sexual and Intimate Relationships Available to Gynae and breast patients at the moment, others by discussion. Service to address the needs of women following treatment to help sex and relationship issues.</p>	<p>Contact: Ellie Ricketts—Cancer Information and Support Specialist Address: Mustard Tree Cancer Support Centre, Level 3, Derriford Hospital, Plymouth, PL6 8DH Tel: 01752 431468</p>
<p>Livewell South West: Mindfulness Mindfulness practice can help you develop the ability to deal with life's pressures. Mindfulness meditation is a skill you can develop and a form of self-awareness training that helps you get to know yourself more fully, think more clearly and in the present moment.</p> <p>Managing Anxiety This one hour workshop provides information on the psychological and physical symptoms of anxiety and strategies to manage this including breathing, goal setting and cognitive behaviour therapy</p> <p>Managing Low Mood This one hour workshop provides information on the psychological symptoms of low mood as well as providing strategies to manage this</p> <p>Managing Stress This one hour workshop introduces the symptoms of stress and how the body responds, and provides simple strategies to manage this</p> <p>Sleep Feel, Feel Well Introduces ways to support restful sleep</p>	<p>Livewell South West: To book a place on any of the 1 hour workshops please call: Tel: 01752 435419 or Email: plymouthoptions@nhs.net</p>
<p>Mustard Tree Cancer Support & Triangle Drop In Centres Ask questions, share concerns, offers a range of services including benefits advice. Support, advice and information for cancer patients and their carers</p>	<p>Mustard Tree, Derriford Hospital: Monday to Friday from 9am to 5pm 01752 430060/01752 431468 Kingsbridge: Tuesdays 10am to 4pm 01548 852349 Liskeard: Thursdays 10am to 4pm 01579 373500 Tavistock: Fridays 10am to 4pm 01822 615935</p>
<p>Other Resources</p>	<p>Your GP, Oncology Doctor, Specialist Nurse or District Nurse.</p>

National Resources:

Resource	Contact details
<p>Live Strong Provide support to guide people through the cancer experience.</p>	<p>www.livestrong.org/Get-Help/Learn-About-Cancer/Cancer-Support-Topics/Physical-Effects-of-Cancer/Male-Sexual-Functioning-After-Cancer www.livestrong.org/Get-Help/Learn-About-Cancer/Cancer-Support-Topics/Physical-Effects-of-Cancer/Female-Sexual-Functioning-After-Cancer</p>
<p>Macmillan Cancer Support Provide comprehensive advice and information on all aspects of cancer.</p>	<p>www.macmillan.org.uk 0808 808 0000 (Mon-Fri, 9am-8pm)</p>

Further information:

Macmillan booklets: – available free from the Mustard Tree Macmillan Centre
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Cancer, you and your partner

Body Image

Sexuality and cancer

How are you feeling?
