

Sexual health

Sexual health combines physical, emotional, and social well-being to support a meaningful sexual experience and intimacy. Many cancer treatments such as chemotherapy (chemo), radiation, immunotherapy, surgery, hormonal medicine, or other medicines may cause changes that affect your sexual health and/or fertility. This can happen during treatment or even years after completing treatment.

Potential changes to your sexual health

- Lack of sexual desire.
- Less pleasure during sexual activity.
- Problems with having and/or maintaining an erection.
- Problems with ejaculation, orgasms, and/or urinary leakage.
- Pain during sexual activity.
- Pain or numbness in the genitals.
- Feeling less attractive sexually and/or physically.
- Fertility concerns.

If you have any of these side effects, tell your cancer care team.

Talk with your cancer care team

Talk with cancer care team about your sexual health concerns, even if it feels uncomfortable. Your care team can answer your questions, discuss possible solutions, or refer you to a specialist.

Write down questions before your appointment, such as:

- How long will these symptoms last?
- How can I manage these symptoms?
- Can I have sex during treatment? Do I need to use protection?
- Is there a support group that might help me?
- Will I be able to have children?

Ask your cancer care team if it is okay to have sex during treatment. The answer to this question is specific to you and your treatment plan. Having cancer does not mean you cannot stay sexually active. Even if someone does not want to or is not able to have intercourse, there are many ways to be intimate during and after treatment. Talk with your cancer care team and understand any precautions you may need to take to keep you and your partner safe.

Talk with your partner

Talk with your partner about sex and changes you may experience from cancer or cancer treatment. It is important to talk with your partner how your cancer treatment is affecting your sexual health and ways you can manage these symptoms. Here are a few suggestions to get the conversation started:

- Pick a time when you're alone together, relaxed, and not rushed.
- Be honest and specific, such as: "I want to talk about the pain I have with sex." Describe what feels good, and what doesn't.

- Use specific words, such as erection or ejaculation. If it helps you, take some time to practice these words ahead of time.
- Approach intimacy at a comfortable pace. There is no need to rush.
- Most partners are open to new and creative approaches, such as:
 - Try a new position or choose a different time of day when you have more energy.
 - Find ways to be intimate that are most comfortable.
 - If you can't have sexual intercourse, you can still have sexual activity (such as kissing, touching) that feels pleasurable for both you and your partner.

How to manage symptoms

Learn what options may be best for you. Your cancer care team or sexual health specialist will work with you to create a treatment plan. Ask questions to help you anticipate if medicines and/or devices can be recommended if a sexual health problem occurs.

Some options include:

- Oral medications for erectile dysfunction, such as sildenafil citrate (Viagra®), vardenafil (Levitra®), or tadalafil (Cialis®).
- Penile injections or implants to help achieve an erection.
- Vacuum device (small pump) placed over the penis to increase blood flow.
- Pelvic floor physical therapy, which may strengthen an erection and improve bladder control.
- Counseling, such as talking with a therapist about emotional concerns and sexual changes.

Loss of fertility

Many cancer treatments interfere with fertility and reproductive health. Fertility is important to address before treatment begins. For some people, there may be options to protect and preserve your fertility. After treatment starts, there may be few effective options. To learn if your treatment plan may have fertility risks, **talk with your cancer care team right away.**

Body image

Body image is how you see, think, and feel about your body. Many cancer treatments can change the way you feel about yourself. Changes in body image can be upsetting and may cause you to have negative feelings that affect your confidence and self-esteem.

Some examples of situations that may affect your body image and self-esteem include surgery and radiation in the pelvic area (such as the penis or prostate). Colon surgery that results in an ostomy pouch. Chemo that causes hair loss or weight changes (either gained or lost).

Managing this kind of distress may require significant support. At Dana-Farber, you have many options to help you feel whole again:

- Talk with your cancer care team and create a plan.
- Meet with your oncology social worker and review resources.
- Consider talking with a therapist.
- Join a support group.
- Contact Dana-Farber's Sexual Health Program (details below).

Recovery

Dealing with your new normal is a very important part of your recovery. Take the time to heal physically and emotionally.

Take care of yourself by doing the following:

- Manage general side effects of treatment, such as nausea and fatigue.
- Get more sleep and exercise to increase your energy and well-being.
- Consider whether any medicines you are taking for pain, depression, or other concerns are affecting your sexual health. Ask your doctor about changes that might help.

Resources at Dana-Farber

Counseling

Dana-Farber has clinical social workers, psychiatrists, and psychologists to address the emotional health needs of patients. They provide support around anxiety, depression, uncertainty, relationships, personal safety, and more. They will also talk with you about resources in the community to support you and your family. For more information, call 617-632-3301.

Sexual Health Program

Dana-Farber's Sexual Health Program offers evaluation, education, treatment, and counseling for individuals and couples. The program serves cancer patients and survivors of all ages, genders, and sexual orientations. Their team includes a psychologist, gynecologist, urologist, two endocrinologists, and a fertility expert. Contact the program directly or ask your cancer care team for a referral. To learn more, visit www.dana-farber.org/sexualhealth or email sexualhealthprogram@dfci.harvard.edu.

Learn more about education and recovery for patients and partners experiencing changes in sexual health during and/or after cancer treatment. Call 617-632-4523 or visit www.dana-farber.org/survivor.

Friends' Place

Friends' Place, on the first floor of Dana-Farber's Yawkey Center for Cancer Care, sells hats, wigs, scarves, and more to help patients address physical changes from cancer. The store also sells products related to sexual health, such as lubricants, moisturizers, and vibrators. Call 617-632-2211 or visit www.dana-farber.org/friendsplace

Peer support

Dana-Farber offers many support groups and can help you find one in your community. For details, visit www.dana-farber.org/supportgroups or call Social Work at 617-632-3301.

The instructions in this teaching sheet are for informational purposes only. The content is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your doctor or other qualified health provider with any questions regarding your medical condition. If you experience any significant change in your health during or after treatment, contact a member of your cancer care team right away.