

## ONCOLOGY

## After Chemotherapy Care Instructions

## Sexuality

*What is sexuality?*

Sexuality is unique for every person. A cancer diagnosis and treatment may change sexual feelings, desire, and functioning. After diagnosis and during treatment, your sexual response may be different from what you are used to having. Changes in appearance and negative thoughts may influence your enjoyment of sex. Sexuality is an important part of the quality of everyday life. Changes in sexuality can affect your self-image and relations with others.

You may find that intimacy takes on new meaning. Hugging, touching, holding, and cuddling may become more important, and sexual intercourse may become less important. There is no “right” way to express your sexuality. It is up to you and your partner to decide together what is pleasurable and satisfying to both of you.

Here are some facts about cancer and sexuality:

- Engaging in sex does not make your cancer grow or spread.
- Cancer is not a punishment for past sins or past sexual behavior.
- Not having sex will not cure cancer.
- Cancer is not “catching.”

*What can I do at home to care for myself?*

The following safe sex tips can help you avoid trauma or exposure to sexually transmitted diseases:

- Use condoms (males and females) during sexual activity if there is increased risk of infection or if you are not in monogamous (having only one sexual partner) relationship.
- Use birth control once chemotherapy begins and continue for three months after your last treatment, or as advised by your health care professional.
- Sexual activity is okay while on chemotherapy, except when your blood counts are low. You are at risk for bleeding or infection if your platelets are less than 50,000 or your white blood count is less than 1,000.

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- Avoid "rough" sex that may cause mucosal or skin tearing throughout your cancer treatment.
- Wash hands thoroughly before and after caressing the genital area.
- Use water-based lubrication (e.g., K-Y Jelly, Astroglide, Replens). Do not use petroleum jelly or other oil-based lubricants.
- Clean sexual aids (e.g., vibrators) thoroughly after each use.

Let your nurse or physician know if you have been feeling anxious, worried, distressed, or depressed. There are ways to manage these symptoms. Your health care team will help you decide which method is best for you.

Tips to help you engage in sexual activity include:

- It may be helpful to have sex when you are well rested, such as in the morning. Others have found it helpful to avoid heavy meals. Try several positions that require less effort, such as side-lying positions.
- Relaxation, warm baths, and massages may be helpful for pain. Use cushions and pillows to hold in place for comfort.
- A light meal or crackers and antinausea medicines may be helpful before having sex.

*What resources  
can help me with  
sexuality?*

Being comfortable with your sexuality to maximize sexual function and quality of life is important. Sexuality can enhance self-esteem, improve overall comfort, and make coping with cancer easier.

For more information about support groups, books, or other resources, please ask your health care team. You can also visit **cancer.gov**, **cancer.net**, or **cancer.org** for more information.

*When should I call  
my physician?*

Let your health care team know if you have any questions.