Female Sexual Health:
Practical Pointers During and After Cancer

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Sex, really? You’ve got to be kidding!

- Yes, cancer affects how you feel physically, mentally, emotionally and energetically.
- Think you sex life if over because of cancer? Think again!
How cancer treatments affects the body:

- Transplant & Chemotherapy
  - Low blood counts, risk of infection or bleeding
  - Hair loss, skin rashes, changes in skin sensitivity
  - Nausea, decreased appetite, diarrhea, weight changes
  - Changes in “mucosal tissues” such as
    - sores or dryness in the mouth, gut, vagina and rectum
  - Menopausal changes
  - Fatigue
  - GVHD
How cancer treatments affect the body:

• Surgery
  Skin changes, lymph system, blood flow, nerve damage or sensitivity, body image

• Radiation
  Burns, fibrosis, atrophy, skin sensitivity

• Medications
  Menopausal symptoms, fatigue, nausea, constipation
Sex and Sexuality: Two Parts of the Same Idea

- There’s **sex**, the activity...
- And **sexuality**, the feeling

Cancer affects sex *and* sexuality – *and not usually in a good way!*
Cancer affects sex

• Skin sensitivity, texture
• Vaginal dryness, atrophy, pain
• Premature menopause
• Fertility concerns
• Weight changes
• Scars and surgical changes
• Bowel and bladder function changes
• Fatigue
Cancer affects sexuality:

• Decreased desire, arousal, orgasm
• Confidence, body image, self esteem
• Feeling ‘over touched’ but ‘under held’
• Role changes (feeling like a ‘patient’ instead of a ‘lover’)
• Energy level
• Relationship satisfaction
• Fertility
• Depression, anger worry or anxiety
And it affects partners...

- Role changes
- Fear of causing pain
- Not wanting to be demanding
- Not knowing when or how to bring it up
- Fatigue
- Worry
Practical pointers: what comes first?

- Your BRAIN is your biggest sex organ
- Think it through:
  What do you want or need?
  What would help?
- Set the ground rules
- Allow time to not feel rushed.

- All of these considerations are the same with a partner or alone!
What can help? How do I start?

Think about sex:
- Worries, fears
- Wishes and desires
- Remind yourself of times when sex and intimacy were easy and terrific
- Read something sexy
- Put it on the calendar
- Remember: There is no deadline or expectation for what ‘success’ looks like
Talking about sex helps

• Your partner is not a mind-reader!
• Talk about how you feel – use “I” statements
• Talk about ground rules that help you feel in control, know it is OK to stop
• Share a fantasy, movie or book
• Ask for what you want, need or want to try
• Share what feels good, be willing to demonstrate
Taking the next steps…

• Touch yourself, or guide your partner to touch you, in ways that feel good
• Move on to more sensual/sexual touching if that feels comfortable

• Use plenty of lubricant
• Go slowly, “check in” with what feels good
• Tears, talking, negotiating and even giggling is allowed
• Let every time be it’s own time – give yourself permission to try again
Things That Can Help

**Lubricants**

*Water based:* Slippery, doesn’t stain, washes easily or dries away, can be used with any toys, dilators or condoms, wide variety available.

*Oil based:* Stays slippery, can be used with any toys or dilators, must be washed off, can stain, not to be used with latex condoms.

*Silicone based:* Super slippery, can stain, should not be used with silicone toys.
Things that can help

Vaginal Moisturizers

Over-the-counter products that can be used daily, like hand lotion

• Satin
• Yes
• Replens
• New Poise
• Liquidbeads
Things that can help:

**Toys and Tools**
- Dilators, dildos and fingers
- Vibrators: used internal or external
- Many shapes, sizes and types
- Books and movies
- Clothing that makes you feel sexy
- Express what you’d like in writing if talking is too hard
- Ask for help
Things that can help

Hormones

Estrogen (Rx needed)
• Oral or patch
  – Progesterone if you have a uterus
• Vaginal – cream and ring
• Compounded creams

Supplements

And let’s not underestimate the power of exercise and self-care!
Resources: Stores, Websites and more

- SCCA Survivorship Clinic welcomes any cancer survivor who has completed their acute cancer treatment. 206-288-1024 [www.seattlecca.org/survivorship](http://www.seattlecca.org/survivorship)

- Healthcare providers and staff: doctors, NP’s, PA’s, nurses, psychologists, social workers, counselors, chaplains and others are willing to talk to patients, survivors and family members. Some providers are more comfortable than others – ask!

- **Shine**: A unique cancer specialties store [www.sccashine.org](http://www.sccashine.org)

- **Babeland**: Seattle’s Adult Toy Store [www.babeland.com](http://www.babeland.com)

- **SheBop**: A female friendly sex toy boutique in Portland, OR [www.sheboptheshop.com](http://www.sheboptheshop.com)

- American Cancer Society [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

- [www.livestrong.org](http://www.livestrong.org)
Written Material on Cancer and Sexuality

- Woman, Cancer, Sex by Anne Katz
- Intimacy After Cancer: A Woman’s Guide by Sally Kydd and Dana Rowett
- Sexuality for the Woman with Cancer by the American Cancer Society
- Making Love Again: Hope for Couples Facing Loss of Sexual Intimacy by Keith Laken
- Sexuality and Fertility After Cancer by Leslie R. Schrorer
- Sexual Intimacy for Women: A Guide for Same-Sex Couples by Glenda Corwin
- Sexy Ever After by Patty Brisben and Keri Peterson, MD
- Healing Sex: A Mind-Body Approach to Healing Sexual Trauma by Staci Haines
- And In Health: A Guide for Couples Facing Cancer Together by Dan Shapiro
- This Should Not Be Happening: Young Adults With Cancer by Anne Katz
- Everything Nobody Tells You About Cancer Treatment and Your Sex Life
  http://kanwa.org/sexual-health/a-z-guide
Question and Discussion Time!