

## SEXUALITY DURING CANCER TREATMENT

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When you discover that you have cancer, you begin to fight the disease by focusing on surviving and keeping your body healthy. You also want to keep your life as normal as possible while continuing to enjoy activities that make you feel good about yourself. An important part of your quality of life is your sexual relationship with your loved one. Staff members at GCS are often asked questions about participating in sexual activity during cancer treatment. The following information may help to answer some of your questions and allow you to feel comfortable telling your individual concerns to a member of our staff.

### *What Is Normal Sexual Activity?*

- ▶ There is no “normal” sex life—whether you have cancer or not. “Normal” is individual and personal because people vary widely in their attitudes and routines. “Normal” is whatever gives you and your partner pleasure.
- ▶ It is also normal to be interested in sex throughout your lifetime. Older people can be just as concerned about maintaining sexual activity as younger people.
- ▶ It is common and normal for people with cancer to have less interest in sex at times. You may be completely focused on your health and treatment at first. Certain treatments may make you feel too tired or nauseated to be interested in sex. But as you begin to return to your regular routines, your interest in sex should return.

### *Will I Give My Partner Cancer By Having Intercourse?*

You cannot give your partner cancer through sexual intercourse or any other sexual or sensual activity. Cancer is not contagious.

## *How Will Cancer Affect My Sex Life?*

Many people, healthy or not, find their sex lives affected by emotional, mental and physical difficulties such as marital conflicts, financial strain and fatigue. Cancer patients also must face adjusting to diagnosis of the disease, extra financial pressures, illness-related factors, depression and psychological stress.

Unfortunately, some people think of changes in their sex life as “their problem,” and hesitate to talk about it. In fact, changes in sexual desire and activity are common problems that often can and should be corrected.

Cancer therapies can affect the emotional and physical parts of your sex life. Some of the effects of cancer treatment include:



### *Loss or Decrease of Sexual Desire*

Chemotherapy and other cancer therapies can affect both men’s and women’s levels of desire.

- ▶ Usually this change is temporary. It is often linked to fears about treatment or diagnosis, changes in your appearance, a change in hormone levels, or the removal of ovaries or testicles.
- ▶ Fatigue, or excessive tiredness, is the most common reason patients with cancer report a loss of desire. As your fatigue lessens, your sexual desire should increase.
- ▶ Men sometimes experience a decrease in sexual desire just after a course of chemotherapy, but recover in about one or two weeks.

### *Changes in Your Appearance*

- ▶ Both men and women who undergo cancer therapy can experience physical changes that may impact self-image. From loss of hair to loss of testicles, physical changes can make you feel less attractive and less sure of yourself.
- ▶ Remind yourself that the person who loves you loves more than your looks.
- ▶ This is an important time when counseling can help you work through your apprehensions. Ask your doctor, nurse, or wellness counselor about what to expect, how to get your life back to normal and ways to compensate for temporary obstacles.

## *Pain*

- ▶ While this is the most commonly a problem for women during intercourse, men also occasionally feel genital pain. A man should contact his doctor promptly if pain occurs during intercourse.
- ▶ Pelvic surgery, radiation therapy or other treatment that affects hormones can change the vagina's size and/or moistness. By spending more time with foreplay or using lubricants freely, you and your partner should be able to minimize any discomforts.
- ▶ Ask a member of your healthcare team about special, non-oil-based lubricating products you can try.

## *Fertility*

- ▶ Chemotherapy can affect fertility. It is important to discuss your childbearing wishes with your doctor so you can prepare for any necessary alternatives such as freezing eggs or embryos (women) or banking sperm (men).
- ▶ **Keep in mind that it may be possible to get pregnant despite getting treatment for cancer.** Use birth control during your entire course of cancer treatment. Continue to use birth control after your course of treatment is complete, if you do not want to become pregnant.

## *Communication*

Although many people feel uncomfortable discussing sexual activities, honest communication can improve your emotional, mental and physical well-being. The doctor, nurse, or wellness counselor can let you know what to expect concerning sexual intercourse and your cancer therapy. Please talk with them about any problems you may be having.

If there are some questions you don't feel comfortable discussing with a health professional, the American Cancer Society publishes two "Sexuality and Cancer" booklets (one for women with cancer and one for men). Call the American Cancer Society for a copy of the booklets.

## *Being Intimate without Intercourse*

Just because there are times when intercourse is not an option doesn't mean you can't express intimacy with your loved one.

- ▶ Sexuality includes all of the feelings and actions associated with loving and caring for someone including holding hands, hugging and caressing.

- ▶ Warmth, caring, physical closeness and emotional intimacy are all important parts of your relationship with your partner. They are especially helpful in maintaining a bond when intercourse is not possible.
- ▶ Remember, too, that your partner may feel unsure and afraid about your condition. As a patient, you should not wait to be approached sexually; express desire when you feel able and be willing to communicate.
- ▶ Together you can work on maintaining good communication, making intercourse as comfortable as possible, rebuilding your self-esteem and keeping your love strong.