

Sexuality and Cancer Treatment: Information for Adolescent Girls and Young Adult Women

We know that cancer treatment affects all areas of your life. This includes sexuality. Sexuality includes how you see yourself as a female, how you feel about yourself, your sexual orientation, wanting to feel close to others, wanting to have sex, and how your body responds to sex. Having cancer can affect all of these areas of your sexuality.

Sexual activity includes all forms of sexual activity including intercourse, masturbation, and vaginal, oral and anal sex.

If you are having intimate sexual contact it is important that you talk with your healthcare team about it. This can be your clinic or inpatient nurse, your physician, nurse practitioner or social worker.

Your conversations with your healthcare team about sex, pregnancy, birth control and sexually transmitted infections will be confidential.

Changes in your body and mind

It is important that you also discuss with your partner your feelings about sexuality and the ways cancer treatment is affecting your body image and sexual feelings. You may have fatigue or loss of desire. Changes in your body such as hair loss, scars from surgery, weight loss or weight gain can affect your sexuality. It is normal to lose your desire for sex at times during your treatment but remember these changes are temporary. Other changes during treatment may include vaginal dryness, higher chance of yeast infections and bleeding.

Finding other ways of feeling close

Even though you may feel too tired or weak for sexual activity or it may not be safe, you can still be close to someone. Touching, cuddling, holding, kissing and spending time as a couple can preserve intimacy between you and your partner.

Sexual activity during treatment

An important consideration during treatment is protecting against pregnancy. Talk with your medical team about the options for birth control during treatment. There are risks of sexual activity during treatment when your blood counts are low. The risks include infections and bleeding. In general, platelets should be greater than 50,000 and your ANC should be greater than 1000. These are general recommendations and you should discuss this with your medical team to see what is safe for you.

It is possible to get a sexually transmitted infection (STIs) if you have unprotected sex. Having multiple partners increases your risks of getting an infection. Condoms if used correctly will protect you from STIs.



Sexual activity and chemotherapy

It is generally recommended to wait for 72 hours after chemotherapy to have sex. This is the average time it takes for chemotherapy to leave your body.