



NEBRASKA CANCER SPECIALISTS

the Physicians of Oncology Hematology West

Managing Changes in Reproduction and Sexuality

Not all chemotherapy treatment will result in side effects related to reproductive ability or sexuality, but some may.

It is natural for people who have been diagnosed with cancer to be concerned about the effect of their illness on their sexuality. Right after the diagnosis, you may temporarily lose interest in sex as you focus on understanding your cancer and the treatments available. During or after treatment, you may have difficulty accepting the way your body looks or functions and may have fears about your partner's acceptance of the changes.

Possible chemotherapy-related side effects

Changes in your reproductive abilities or sexuality due to cancer treatment may include:

- Gynecomastia (formation of breast tissue in men)
- Impotence (inability to achieve or sustain an erection)
- Sterility
- Reduced sexual desire
- Infertility
- Irregular menstrual cycles
- Menopause and related symptoms
- Vaginal dryness

Some of these side effects will resolve after treatment is completed; others may be more long-term.

Managing sexual dysfunction

One of the most common problems regarding cancer and sexuality is people's reluctance to talk about it with their sexual partner and their healthcare team. However, communication is the key to coping with this difficult topic. Cancer care specialists are accustomed to addressing these sensitive issues every day.

Perhaps more importantly, sharing your thoughts, feelings, and any fears you may have regarding sexual dysfunction with your partner is essential to maintaining an intimate relationship with that person.

Through open communication, you and your partner can work toward finding other ways to express yourselves beyond intercourse, such as gentle touching, holding hands, kissing, hugging, and sharing emotional closeness.

Support a Positive Self-Image

Concerns about the impact of cancer and treatment on sexuality are often closely linked to issues of self-esteem and body image.

Cancer treatment often involves surgery; surgery can leave scars and cause physical or neurologic damage. Radiation treatment and chemotherapy can produce side effects such as hair loss and extreme fatigue. These effects and others can strongly influence how a person with cancer feels about his or her body and sexuality.

These suggestions have helped many people with cancer:

- It sounds simple, but looking better may actually help you feel better. Try to maintain the same grooming habits—fashion, hairstyle, and so on—as you did before your diagnosis.
- Plan special activities for both the days when you're feeling well and those when you aren't. Acknowledge that cancer and treatment can cause shifts in mood.
- Enjoy the days when you're feeling well. On those days that are difficult, keep a positive outlook.
- If you need help with clothes and hair and other aspects of your appearance, don't hesitate to ask for it. The "Look Good...Feel Better" program of the American Cancer Society (ACS), for example, can help.
- The ACS publications "Sexuality for Women and Their Partners" and "Sexuality for Men and Their Partners" may also be helpful to you.
- Ask one of the nurses to order one of these books for you; free of charge.

Managing reproductive issues

If you think you may want to have children after treatment, you may wish to bank eggs or sperm. However, you must do this before you receive your treatment.

Talk to your doctor about your wish to have children in advance so that you can take steps to ensure that you have this choice later.

If you or your partner becomes pregnant before, during, or after cancer treatment, tell your doctor immediately.

Treating reproductive and sexual problems

There are several drug treatments for men with symptoms of low testosterone or erectile dysfunction. There are also medications available to help women deal with the symptoms of menopause.

For more information feel free to visit the website chemocare.com