

Sexual Health and Cancer

Sexual health is the state of well-being that focuses on our feelings about our own sexuality. It may include the physical, emotional and cultural aspects of sexual well-being.

People can express and experience sexuality through:

- Their bodies
- The act of sex
- Sexual orientation
- Gender identity (male or female)
- Values about life, love and the people in their lives

Sexual health is a normal concern for people undergoing cancer treatment.

Change in sexual desire

You may notice a change in your sexual desire during cancer treatment. You may also have trouble being able to achieve an orgasm. This may be due to:

- Pain
- Fatigue
- Changes in hormones
- Depression and anxiety
- Changes in your self-image

Ways to express intimacy without sexual intercourse

Love and affection can be expressed in many ways:

- Kissing
- Hugging
- Cuddling
- Touching
- Fondling
- Holding hands

Talk to your care team to see if it is all right to have sexual activity during active cancer treatment.

Precautions during sexual activity

- Use a barrier contraceptive, such as a condom or dental dam, to prevent the exchange of bodily fluids. During cancer treatment, semen, saliva and vaginal fluids may contain anti-cancer treatment by-products.
- Chemotherapy may affect male semen and female eggs. Medications you are taking may be harmful to a growing fetus. Talk to your care team about birth control methods.
- To help prevent infection from sexual activity, follow these guidelines:
 - Wash your genitals before and after sex.
 - Wash hands before and after sexual activity.
 - Avoid rectal intercourse.
- Avoid excessive friction during intercourse by using a water-based lubricant, such as K-Y Jelly® or Astroglide®. Do not use petroleum-based jellies or lubricants.

Tips to promote sexual health

- Talk with a member of your care team.
- Talk to your partner about your feelings.
- Take time for intimacy other than intercourse.
- Keep an open mind about ways to feel sexual pleasure.

When to call your care team

If you have any of these symptoms, contact your care team.

- Unusual pain, bleeding or discharge
- A temperature more than 100.5 degrees F
- Changes in your sexual drive
- For males: Genital pain, pain during erection and/or ejaculation, or problems having an erection
- For females: Dryness in the vagina, unusual discharge from your vagina, hot flashes, pain during sex, discomfort, or bleeding during or after intercourse

Resources:

Northwestern Medicine Center for Sexual Medicine and Menopause
312.694.9676

[nm.org/locations/center-for-sexual-medicine-and-menopause](https://www.nm.org/locations/center-for-sexual-medicine-and-menopause)

Northwestern Medicine Center for Fertility and Reproductive Medicine
312.695.7269

[nm.org/healthbeat/medical-advances/oncofertility](https://www.nm.org/healthbeat/medical-advances/oncofertility)

Erectile Dysfunction Specialists and Care Centers
844.344.6663

[nm.org/conditions-and-care-areas/urology/erectile-dysfunction/specialists-and-care-centers](https://www.nm.org/conditions-and-care-areas/urology/erectile-dysfunction/specialists-and-care-centers)

Northwestern Medicine Women's Integrated Pelvic Health Program
312.694.7337

[iphp.nm.org](https://www.iphp.nm.org)

American Cancer Society
800.227.2345

[cancer.org](https://www.cancer.org)

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