

What you need to know about...

Radiation Therapy And Sexuality

Many cancer patients experience radiation therapy side effects that change their sex lives. Treatment can result in scarring, fatigue, diarrhea, nausea and vomiting, which can cause you to lose interest in sex. Other ways radiation therapy may affect your sexuality include:

- Loss of interest in sex because of pain, medications or changes in how you view your body.
- Changes to your physical appearance and sexual organs that can affect the way you have sex. For example, some men can no longer get or keep an erection after prostate cancer treatment. Radiation therapy can damage women's vaginal tissues, causing irritation and dryness.
- Infertility caused by some cancer treatments. However, this depends on your age and whether you already have or plan to have children.

Communication and creativity can help you overcome the challenges of dealing with radiation therapy side effects.

Communication

First, communicate openly with your physician and other members of the oncology team. Don't be embarrassed to ask for help or to ask whether you can resume sex.

Next, talking directly with your partner is important. For example, you may think he or she is turned off by your body or diagnosis, but your partner may fear hurting you or may be waiting for you to say you are ready to resume sexual activity. The best way to take the first step, particularly if you must alter the way you enjoy sex, is to talk honestly with one another. It is important to feel good about yourself, and your partner, family, friends or support group can help you focus on your positive features.

Creativity

Open communication and scheduling relaxation time with your partner will help you come up with creative solutions to rekindle sexual interest.

Many cancer patients find they must try different sexual positions and methods of arousal. Some adjustments are temporary, while others are more permanent. For example, some experts suggest that women undergoing radiation therapy for cancer of the pelvis continue intercourse or use a dilator, a device that gently stretches vaginal tissues. This helps decrease tissue shrinkage.

Check with your physician before having intercourse, however, because this is not advised for all patients. The following strategies also may help:

- Women can use a water-based lubricant during sex to decrease dryness.
- A woman with breast cancer who doesn't want her partner to see or touch her missing or treated breast can wear a fancy camisole.
- Many men find medication or surgery helps improve arousal and ejaculatory function after cancer treatment for prostate or testicular cancer.

Your physician, nurse or radiation therapist can offer more tips specific to your cancer type and treatment, or he or she may refer you to a sex therapist for additional help. ♦



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