Sexual Health for Women

Dana-Farber’s Sexual Health Program helps men and women address questions and concerns about changes in sexual function and desire after cancer. It provides evaluation, education, treatment, and counseling for patients and their partners.

A quality of life issue

It is very common for cancer survivors to have some changes or problems with sexual functioning after treatment. Sometimes these problems are short-term; other challenges may be longer lasting. Because sexual function involves many dimensions including body, mind, behavior, and relationships, Dana-Farber’s Sexual Health Program takes an integrative approach to care.

We believe that sexuality is an important quality-of-life issue. Sexual problems after cancer can negatively impact one’s ability to enjoy life, and we encourage patients to take a step-by-step approach to finding ways to improve sexual activity after cancer.

Talk with your partner

Sexual partners of cancer survivors often have questions or concerns about sexual activity during or after cancer treatment. Some couples may find these changes hard to talk about.

- Approach the process of becoming intimate at a pace that’s comfortable for both of you.
- Choose a moment when you’re alone and relaxed, and dedicate some time for talking about recent changes in intimacy.
- Often partners aren’t sure about how to start the conversation, and this topic can become the elephant in the room. Give yourselves permission to talk honestly and openly about your feelings, both good and bad, without judging them.

Tell your doctor what’s going on

Survivors sometimes assume that sexual problems cannot be managed because doctors who treat cancer may not always bring up the topic. Fortunately, such issues are treatable and help is available.

- Questions about sexual health may be difficult to bring up with your doctor, but such concerns are normal and perfectly appropriate to discuss.
- Start by identifying your main concerns and questions. Write them down before your appointment, and try to be specific.
- Instead of saying “intimacy is a problem,” offer a specific example, such as loss of desire or pain during intercourse. Your doctor or nurse can address your concerns and offer tips, or they can advise you about where to get support, such as from a sexual health professional.
- Many patients find it helpful to have an evaluation and consultation at a sexual health clinic that specializes in working with cancer patients and survivors.

Coping with vaginal dryness

Vaginal dryness, including chafing, irritation, and tightness, is common after undergoing cancer treatment. This condition can also make sex painful. When sex hurts, sexual interest often quickly diminishes. Typical pain medications probably won’t help, but there are a number of options for treating this problem.

Adult Survivorship Program

a member of the LIVESTRONG Survivorship Center of Excellence Network
Vaginal dryness may be addressed by using both vaginal moisturizers and vaginal lubricants.

- **Vaginal moisturizers**, which are available in gels, tablets, or liquid beads, provide a smooth layer of moisture that adheres to the vaginal tissue and improves the vaginal pH. They are applied with a slim applicator or a vaginal suppository two or more times a week. The best absorption occurs when used prior to bedtime.
  - Moisturizers are non-hormonal and available over-the-counter (without a prescription). Examples include brand names Replens, Luvena, or Hyalo-Gyn.

- **Vaginal lubricants** provide a temporary protective coating and should be applied in the vagina and around the genitals immediately before sexual activity.
  - Petroleum-based lubricants can irritate tissue, may damage condoms and diaphragms, and can increase risk of infection.
  - Water-based lubricants without perfumes or other irritants are best and wash away more easily. Examples include brand names Astroglide, Liquid Silk, and Slippery Stuff.

**TIP:** Use soaps and bubble baths sparingly, because they can dry vaginal tissue.

The **Friends’ Place** store on the first floor of Dana-Farber’s Yawkey Center for Cancer Care stocks vaginal moisturizers and vaginal lubricants. Visit in person or shop online at [www.dana-farberfriendsplace.org](http://www.dana-farberfriendsplace.org). Such products are also available from other online retailers and your local pharmacy.

*If vaginal moisturizers or lubricants are not providing enough relief, talk with your doctor about other types of treatment.*

**Online resources**

- All About Sexual Health: [www.livestrong.com/sexual-health](http://www.livestrong.com/sexual-health)
- North American Menopause Society: [www.menopause.org](http://www.menopause.org)
- American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists: [www.acog.org/Patients](http://www.acog.org/Patients)

**Getting started**

Dana-Farber’s Sexual Health Program is open to all cancer patients and survivors, whether treated at Dana-Farber or elsewhere. It provides individual and couples counseling, referral and follow-up, and education for patients. To learn more, visit [www.dana-farber.org/sexualhealth](http://www.dana-farber.org/sexualhealth) or contact a clinician in Dana-Farber’s Sexual Health Program by calling 617-632-4LAD (Life After Diagnosis) or emailing dfci_adultsurvivors@dfci.harvard.edu.

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