

Tip Sheet:

Sexual Health for Men Facing Cancer

We believe sexuality is a quality-of-life issue, whether you are single or partnered. Taking care of your sexual health is an important part of your cancer care. Sexual health problems with cancer are common, and there are many ways to manage them and get support. Cancer and its treatment can lead to physical and emotional changes that affect sexual health. Treatments can alter your energy level, mood, body image, sense of well-being, and ability to enjoy sex and intimacy. These changes can happen during and after chemotherapy, radiation therapy, surgery, or hormone therapy.

Common symptoms

Some sexual difficulties may be temporary while others are longer lasting. You may notice:

- Lack of sexual desire
- Decrease in pleasure during sexual activity
- Difficulty getting or keeping an erection (erectile dysfunction, or ED)
- Ejaculation and orgasm problems, such as ejaculating early, leaking urine, or not releasing semen during orgasm
- Pain during sex
- Negative feelings about your body and sexual attractiveness
- Fertility problems

Causes

Whether cancer affects your sexual health will depend on your type of cancer, treatment, age, sexual history, and other factors. For example:

- Various cancer treatments can cause pain, fatigue, nausea and vomiting, bladder or bowel problems, changes in appearance, and other side effects that can lower your sexual desire and self-esteem.
- Treatment for pelvic cancers (prostate, bladder, colon, rectum, penis, etc.) often causes sexual health problems and can lead to temporary or permanent infertility. For example, surgery and radiation therapy may damage nerves and blood vessels that control erections.
- Chemotherapy often causes general side effects that may dampen your sexual desire. It can also trigger temporary or permanent infertility.
- Hormone therapy may lower your sexual desire and energy and make it difficult to have erections or orgasms.
- A cancer diagnosis can make you feel afraid, anxious, or sad, and cause stress in relationships, which can affect sexual function and pleasure.

Other factors

Other factors that can affect a man's sexual health include older age; being overweight; heavy drinking or smoking; medical conditions like heart disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes; fatigue; and medications for pain, nausea, sleep problems, anxiety, or depression.

What you can do

Tell your care team

Talk with your Dana-Farber care team about your sexual health concerns, even if it feels uncomfortable. Your team can answer questions, discuss possible solutions, or refer you to a specialist. Write down questions before your appointment, such as, “What sexual changes may happen during/after treatment, and what approaches may help?”

Talk with your partner

- Pick a time when you’re alone, relaxed, and not rushed.
- Be honest and open.
- Know that even if you can’t have intercourse, you can still have sexual activity (kissing, touching, etc.) that feels pleasurable.
- Approach intimacy at a comfortable pace.
- Discuss what feels good and what doesn’t.
- Be creative. Find ways to be intimate that are most comfortable, like trying different positions.

Take care of your overall health

- Get more sleep and exercise to increase your energy and well-being.
- Consider whether any medicines you are taking for pain, depression, or other issues are affecting your sexual health. Ask your doctor about changes that might help.
- Use a reliable form of birth control to prevent pregnancy, even if treatments have likely affected your fertility.
- For intercourse, use a condom for at least 48 hours after chemotherapy treatment to protect your partner from toxins that can stay in semen. Your care team may recommend a longer time period.

Consider treating side effects

Ask your doctor if any of the following are options for you:

- Oral medications for erectile dysfunction, such as sildenafil citrate (Viagra), vardenafil (Levitra), or tadalafil (Cialis)
- Penile injections or implants to help achieve an erection
- Vacuum device (small pump) placed over the penis to increase blood flow
- Pelvic floor exercises, which may help increase ability to have erections and improve bladder control
- Counseling, such as talking with a therapist about emotional issues and sexual changes

Resources at Dana-Farber

Sexual Health Program

Dana-Farber’s Sexual Health Program offers evaluation, education, treatment, and counseling for individuals and couples with sexual health issues. The program serves cancer patients and survivors of all ages, genders, and sexual orientations. Its clinical team includes a psychologist, gynecologist, urologist, two endocrinologists, and a fertility expert. Contact the program directly or ask your care

team for a referral. To learn more, visit www.dana-farber.org/sexualhealth, call **617-632-4523**, or email sexualhealthprogram@dfci.harvard.edu.

Our Sexual Health Program works with the Men's Sexual Health Clinic at Brigham and Women's Hospital, which provides medical treatments for erectile dysfunction. To schedule an appointment, call **617-732-6325**. To learn more, visit www.brighamandwomens.org and search for "men's sexual health clinic."

Counseling

Dana-Farber clinical social workers, psychiatrists, and psychologists work with our medical providers to address the emotional and mental health needs of patients and, in some cases, family members. We provide support around anxiety, depression, sleeping difficulties, uncertainty, relationships, personal safety, and more. We can also talk with you about resources in the community to support you and your family. For more information, call **617-632-3301**.

Peer support

- Dana-Farber offers many **support groups** and can help find one in your community. For details, visit www.dana-farber.org/supportgroups or call **617-632-3301**.
- **One-to-One** is a free telephone-based program that connects Dana-Farber patients and families with trained volunteers who have experienced cancer. Call **617-632-4020** or visit www.dana-farber.org/onetoone.
- **SoulMates** is a program that connects new breast cancer patients with survivors who have faced a similar diagnosis. Call **617-632-6501** or visit www.dana-farber.org/soulmates.

Friends' Place

Friends' Place is a specialty store on the first floor of the Yawkey Center that offers hats, wigs, scarves, prostheses, and more to help patients address physical changes that can result from cancer treatment. Call **617-632-2211** or visit www.dana-farber.org/friendsplace.

For more information

To access the internet during your visits to Dana-Farber, consider using one of the free computer workstations in the Blum Patient and Family Resource Center, or borrow an iPad from the Shapiro Center for Patients and Families. Both centers are on the first floor of the Yawkey Center.

This document is for informational purposes only. The content is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition.