

## Tip Sheet:

# Sexual Health for Women Facing Cancer

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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 and vaginal 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
- Problems with reaching sexual arousal and/or orgasm
- Pain during sex
- Vaginal dryness and tightness
- Discomfort or numbness in the genitals
- 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.
- Some chemotherapy and radiation therapy can trigger menopause symptoms (such as hot flashes and vaginal dryness) and infertility.
- Surgery can lead to scars, a colostomy bag, or other changes that affect your body and self-image.
- Hormone therapy, such as anti-estrogen treatment after breast cancer, may trigger hot flashes, vaginal pain, and lower sex drive.
- 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 woman'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.
- Approach intimacy at a comfortable pace.
- Know that even if you can't have intercourse, you can still have sexual activity (kissing, touching, etc.) that feels pleasurable.
- 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 vaginal secretions. Your care team may recommend a longer time period.

### **Managing vaginal dryness**

Vaginal dryness can occur when cancer-related treatments cause a significant loss of estrogen. The vaginal tissue becomes dry, thinner, and less flexible, and more prone to tears and cracks. This can lead to vaginal discomfort (irritation, stinging, itching, tightness), urinary problems, vaginal discharge, and painful sex. Treatment options include:

- Vaginal lubricants help reduce friction and increase comfort when used before sexual activity. They come in liquid or gel form and do not contain hormones or require a prescription. Choose a water-based or silicone-based lubricant; oil-based lubricants may damage latex condoms.
- Vaginal moisturizers help restore vaginal health, regardless of sexual activity. They come as gels, tablets, or liquid beads. They are applied several times a week and work best when used before bedtime.
- Natural products like coconut, sweet almond, or olive oils can moisturize and lubricate vaginal tissue, but they can damage latex condoms.
- Vaginal estrogen therapy releases small amounts of the hormone estrogen to restore vaginal health. It comes as a cream, tablet, or flexible ring and requires a prescription. Talk with your cancer doctor about whether this is a good option for you.

### **Managing vaginal discomfort**

Treatment options include:

- Lubricants and moisturizers (see above)
- Pelvic-floor physical therapy uses massage, exercises, and other techniques to relax and strengthen vaginal and pelvic floor muscles.
- Vaginal dilators (tapered cylinders made of silicone or plastic) help gently stretch vaginal tissue and relax muscles.
- Vibrators increase blood flow to the vaginal area.
- Counseling can help manage emotional issues that may be contributing to vaginal discomfort.

Lifestyle changes include quitting smoking, engaging in regular sexual activities, doing Kegel exercises, wearing loose-fitting clothes and cotton underwear, and avoiding scented soap and other products in the vaginal area. If you wear a panty liner, you may use a small amount of protective skin ointment if you find that liners are causing dryness.

## 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](http://www.dana-farber.org/sexualhealth), call **617-632-4523**, or email [sexualhealthprogram@dfci.harvard.edu](mailto:sexualhealthprogram@dfci.harvard.edu).

### 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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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.

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