



Dana-Farber
Cancer Institute



**BRIGHAM AND
WOMEN'S HOSPITAL**

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Sexual Health + Dating

Recognizing Changes in Your Experience of Intimacy

Give yourself time to adjust. Cancer treatment is a life-changing experience and may affect your self-image. At first, if you have a partner, you may want to focus on other ways of being close rather than sexual activity. Once you are ready to begin having sex, you may find that there are new issues that affect your sexual experience after completing treatment. These can be both physical (pain, vaginal dryness from hormonal changes, loss of sensation following breast surgery) and emotional (lower desire for sex, changes in ability to reach orgasm). Sometimes these problems are short-term while others may last longer. It is important to approach new issues from multiple angles because sexual function involves many dimensions including body, mind, behavior, and relationships.

"It's important to remember that your experience of sexuality and intimacy is not defined by any one body part or a specific capacity for activity. It's much bigger: it's all of you." Dr. Sharon Bober

Tell Your Doctor What's Going On

Talking to your doctor about your sex life throughout your cancer journey is critical to understanding and managing your side effects. It is particularly critical to talk with your doctor to make sure that it is safe for you to be having sex and if there are any precautions, like contraceptive use, that you should be taking. Women with breast cancer sometimes assume that sexual problems cannot be managed because doctors who treat cancer may not always bring up the topic. Fortunately, these 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. If you feel uncomfortable bringing the issue up with your oncologist, trusted nurses and social workers can also help.
- Start by identifying your main concerns and questions. Write them down before your appointment and be specific. It may also help to keep track of your symptoms in a journal.
- Instead of saying "intimacy is a problem," offer a specific example, such as "I am experiencing loss of desire" or "I am having pain during sex." Your doctor, nurse or social worker 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 go to a sexual health clinic that specializes in working with cancer patients and survivors.
- If you are still having trouble bringing up these issues with your care team, check out this young adult sexual health blog where you can submit questions to Dr. Anne Katz, [here](#).

Tips for Managing These Changes at Home

Sexual dysfunction in women typically falls into four, often overlapping categories, many of which can be directly or indirectly caused by your cancer treatment:

1. Desire and arousal problems: Some women with desire and arousal problems may not feel mental and/or physical excitement from sex. This is particularly common if there are changes in how a woman feels about herself or her body for example some women experience these feelings after surgery. However, desire and



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arousal problems can also be a physical response to medications you may be taking. You can enhance your desire and arousal by making time for sex and talking with your partner about issues you have been having in your sexual relationship. Increasing time spent on foreplay and sensual touch can also help with arousal.

2. **Orgasm problems:** For many women, sharing love and closeness without having an orgasm is satisfying. Other women may feel that not having an orgasm is an issue. Problems with orgasming can mean you take longer to have an orgasm, or your orgasm have become less frequent or intense. Try increasing sexual stimulation, using sex toys, or using mental imagery/fantasy to help you reach climax.
3. **Sexual pain:** Pain during sex can arise from vaginal dryness or other menopausal symptoms, which can happen with or without penetration. Try using vaginal moisturizers and/or lubricant during sex. Start with sensual activities like massage or cuddling. When you are ready, try sexual activities that do not cause pain like masturbation or oral sex, or experiment with new positions that cause less pain.
4. **Sexual problems caused by medication:** Hormone therapy and many mental health medications can cause an of the problems listed above. Different options may be available to you, so talk with your doctor about how side effects of these medications are affecting your sex life.

Livestrong.org has a comprehensive chart addressing treatments for various emotional and physical sexual side effects [here](#). The American Cancer Society also offers general resources on how to address sexual issues during cancer treatment [here](#).

Talk With Your Partner

Sexual partners of women with breast cancer often have questions or concerns about sexual activity during or after cancer treatment. Some couples may find it hard to have an open and honest conversation about these changes.

- 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 to dedicate some time to discuss recent changes in intimacy.
- Often partners aren't sure about how to start the conversation, which can cause this topic to become the elephant in the room. Give yourselves permission to talk honestly and openly about your feelings, both good and bad, without judging them.

Dating During Cancer Treatment

How do you start dating when living with cancer? Here are some ideas that have helped others:

- Start by working on other areas of your social life besides dating and sex. Make an effort to see friends and family. Try a new activity. Join a club. Take a class. These activities can increase your comfort level in being around people.
- Make a list of your good points. Focus on what you bring to a relationship.
- Try not to let cancer be an excuse for not dating or trying to meet people.
- Do not tell a new date about your cancer right away. Wait until you feel a sense of trust and friendship, but do not wait until you are about to have sex.
- Practice what you will say to someone if you are worried about how you will handle it. Think about how they might react and be ready with a response.



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- Think about dating as a learning process with the goal of having a social life you enjoy. Not every date has to be a "success." If some people reject you (which can happen with or without cancer), you have not failed.
- Remember that not all dates "worked out" before you had cancer.

If you do not have a partner, the American Cancer Society also has resources for being single with cancer and how to discuss your diagnosis when dating [here](#).

For more information or to find a certified sex therapist:

- Search for a certified sex therapist near you through the American Association of Sexuality Educators Counselors and Therapists ([AASECT](#))
- [A Q&A with Sharon Bober, PhD, on sex, intimacy and cancer](#)
- [The Sexual Health Program at DFCI](#)
- [The Women's Integrative Health Program at OSU](#)