

# Sexual Health and Cancer

## For people with a penis

Sexual health is an important part of your well-being. It has a positive impact on your quality of life. Sexual health is important for many reasons:

- Improves your physical and emotional well-being.
- Supports emotional connection between partners.
- Promotes positive self-image (how you feel about yourself and your body).

Cancer diagnosis, treatment, and recovery can impact sexual health in many ways. What makes up a satisfying sex life is different for each person. A personalized approach is key.

### Cancer and cancer treatment can affect sexual health in many ways

- Sexual side effects can be upsetting for you and your partner and may include:
  - Erectile dysfunction – difficulty getting or keeping an erection that is firm
  - Peyronie’s disease – a condition that changes the shape and curve of an erect penis
  - Lower sexual interest
  - Changes to ejaculation and orgasm
  - Changes to your confidence, body image, and relationship
- **Medications and chemotherapy:** These treatments can damage sexual organs. They can also change your hormone levels. For example, lower testosterone can affect sexual desire and fertility (ability to have children).
  - Small amounts of cancer treatment drugs may stay in semen, vaginal discharge, and urine for up to a week after treatment. This can be passed to partners. Please talk to your cancer care team if this is an issue with your treatment.
- **Surgery:** Having your prostate, bladder, rectum, or other pelvic organs removed may change the sexual experience. Common changes are erectile dysfunction and dry orgasm (no semen).
  - After surgery, some people have problems with their bowels (organs involved in bowel movements or going poo). They may have bowel urgency and loss of bowel control.
  - Some people may need a stoma (an opening on the skin of the abdomen where bowel movements flow into a bag). This may impact body image. You may also need to adjust the bag during sexual activity.
- **Radiation therapy** for bladder, kidney, prostate, and anal cancers can cause inflammation, irritation, bleeding, nerve damage and scarring. This can impact the ability to get or maintain erections. It can also change sensations of orgasm and cause dry orgasm.
- **Emotional changes:** Emotions such as stress, anxiety, and depression can lower sexual interest and arousal, change erections, change whether you can have an orgasm, or change the timing of orgasm.
- **Changes to your body:** Cancer treatments may change how your body looks. Side effects can include hair loss, scars, and weight changes. Changes can affect how you and others feel about the way you look. Your feelings can affect your intimate relationships.

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### Where to start?

- The first step is giving yourself permission to have questions and concerns about sexuality.
- It is important to recognize that you are not alone. Up to half of people in Canada will have sexual health concerns, even if they do not have cancer.
- After cancer treatment, some of the changes may get better over time. However, some changes may be permanent (they will never go away). Practice being kind to yourself and give yourself time to heal.

### Talking with your partners

Talking with your partner about your fears and concerns is part of a healthy relationship. For some couples, talking about sexual health can be difficult.

Some people may pull away and suffer in silence. It is important to talk to your partner about how cancer is affecting you and your relationship.

Explore new ways of connecting with your partner. Adjust your usual sexual activities. Some people say they feel closer to their partners during difficult times because they talk more and expect less. If you or your partner need help talking about these issues, make an appointment with a counsellor.

[BC Cancer Patient & Family Counselling information](#)

### Talking with your health care team

Sexual health is an important part of your overall health. Your health care team can help by reviewing your situation, talking about options, and making referrals.

### Questions you can ask:

- Do I need to stop having sex for a while?
- Will I have lasting changes? Ask about damage to nerves or tissues involved in making erections. Also ask about hormone treatment that can change sexual desire.
- Do I need to use condoms or contraceptives (to protect against pregnancy and transferring body fluids)?
- Can I use any drugs or devices for erectile dysfunction? Or hormone therapy to improve testosterone levels?
- Do I need a referral to a sexual medicine specialist to help manage these symptoms?

### Things you can do:

- Make an appointment to talk to a counsellor or join a support program.
- Talk to your doctor about a referral to a sexual health clinic. There are treatment options for many sexual side effects.
- Focus on ways to maintain intimacy with your partner (if partnered) even with changes in sexual function.



Provincial Health Services Authority

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## To learn more

- [BC Cancer Library Sexuality and Partner Support Pathfinder](#)
- [Prostate Cancer Supportive Care Program](#)
- [Canadian Cancer Society - Sex, Intimacy and Cancer](#)
- [Cancer.net - Dating, Sex and Reproduction](#)
- [Cancer.org - Cancer facts for gay and bisexual men](#)
- [BC Cancer Resources for LGBTQ2S+ Cancer Patients](#)