

# Sexual Health and Cancer

For people with a vulva/vagina

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 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

- **Changes to your body:** Cancer treatments can change genital anatomy (such as the vulva and vagina), hormone levels, and sexual response. These changes may include vaginal dryness, pain during sex, bleeding after sex, and lower genital sensations.
- **Emotional changes:** Emotions such as anxiety, fear, sadness, and loss can affect sexual health. Coping with emotions can make it difficult to take part in or enjoy sexual activity.
- **Fatigue (extreme tiredness):** Cancer treatment often causes fatigue. A cancer diagnosis can also impact your sleep. Being tired can make it difficult to enjoy or want to take part in sexual activity.
- **Relationship impacts:** Cancer can put a strain on relationships. Communication challenges, concerns about the future, and changes in responsibilities can affect relationships.
- **Body image:** Cancer and its treatments may lead to changes in how you see your body. This can be due to hair loss, scarring, weight changes, and surgical changes. These changes can impact your self-esteem and body confidence. You may be less interested in sexual activity. You may also avoid any sexual activity.
- **Fear of recurrence:** Can cause anxiety and worry. This may lower your sexual satisfaction.
- **Medications:** Some cancer treatments can affect sexual function and desire. For example, aromatase inhibitors for breast cancer can lower hormone levels. This may lead to severe menopausal symptoms such as hot flashes and vaginal dryness.

## 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.

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## Talking with your partners

Communicating with your partner about your fears and concerns is part of a healthy relationship. Talking about sexual health can be difficult. Here are some tips which may help:

- Schedule a conversation and ensure both people know the topic ahead of time.
- Be present and focus on what your partner is saying.
- Validate their concerns and comments.
- Have some ideas of positive changes you would like to make in your physical relationship.

[BC Cancer Patient and Family Counselling](#) services can also help you with these types of conversations.

## 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 during cancer treatment?
- How will the cancer treatment impact my sexual function?
- Will my cancer treatment lead to menopause and what does that mean? What menopausal treatment options are available for me?
- Will I need to keep using birth control during cancer treatment?
- What can I do to improve my sexual function after cancer treatment?

**Things you can do:** Options depend on your cancer and treatment as well as your goals for sexuality.

- Use lubricants. We recommend silicone-based lubes (for example, Uberlube), and moisturizers (for example, Glaxal base). These can help with vulvo-vaginal dryness which may lead to daily discomfort or pain with sex.
- Use vaginal inserts after surgery or pelvic radiation if your health care team has recommended these. These can help stop your vagina from narrowing and scar tissue forming.
- Visit a physiotherapist for pelvic floor physiotherapy. Your pelvic floor is made up of muscles that support pelvic organs like your bladder and bowels. Physiotherapy will help with pelvic floor issues, such as painful sex and bladder incontinence (when you cannot control your bladder), and using vaginal inserts.
- Learn about sexual health. It is more complicated than you think! Great books for this are “Woman Cancer Sex” by Anne Katz and “Come As You Are” by Emily Nagoski.
- Make an appointment to talk to a registered psychologist or registered clinical counsellor who practices sex therapy. You can also join a support program.

**Ask about a referral to the [BC Cancer Sexual Medicine & Menopause Clinic](#)**



Provincial Health Services Authority

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## To learn more

- [BC Cancer Library Sexuality and Partner Support Pathfinder](#)
- [Canadian Cancer Society - Sex, Intimacy and Cancer](#)
- [Cancer.net - Dating, Sex and Reproduction](#)
- [Cancer.org - Cancer facts for lesbians and bisexual women](#)
- [BC Cancer Resources for LGBTQ2S+ Cancer Patients](#)